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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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Holiness

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Isaiah 6:1-11.

In this passage, if the text were printed in the Hebrew form, that is, translated according to the Hebrew emphasis, various words would be thrown up in clear relief, and they would be in Isaiah 6 the following words or phrases: 'throne' (6:1), 'temple' (6:1), 'woe' (6:5), 'altar' (6:6), 'go' (6:9), and 'how long' (6:11).

So there are six leading words or phrases in this passage, and these give you very largely the key to its message. What is clearly represented by this chapter is that the whole question is that of holiness. Everything else is included in that. This is not, first of all, as has so often been stressed, a message about service. Service is there, but it is not the main thing. Worship is there, and this passage has been very often used, and is constantly used, as something for public worship, to introduce the element of worship. But worship, like service, is not the primary thing; it is also conditional and contingent. There are several things here in this portion which could be dealt with as things in themselves, but everything is included in one thing, and that is *holiness*.

God's Judgement

It relates to Israel's condition to begin with. As you see, the chapter brings that in, and the chapter itself is set within that realm with regard to Israel and then with regard to the nations beyond. It is a question of holiness. The Lord, in taking account of things, in raising up this prophet, does so because of an unholy state which has made necessary the determination to judge, and has brought into view for a time the closing of those mercies of God, and for a period, the casting off of His people, though He will not cast off for ever. Captivity is in view, judgement is in view, and it is all a

matter of holiness. The terrible issue of this chapter is that what the people have been doing themselves spiritually, is now fixed by the Lord. They have been closing their eyes; now the Lord fixes that state. They have been closing their ears; the Lord takes action. They have been hardening their hearts; the Lord hardens. They have been living for themselves; the Lord hands them over to themselves. So the judgement fixed is by reason of an unholy state, and everything has to do with holiness.

God's Call

Then so far as the prophet is concerned, first of all there is his call. He is brought in, and his call carries with it the necessity for separation. You notice that immediately the question of holiness is raised, the prophet becomes conscious of being involved in the whole state: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). He is conscious, as he was never conscious before, of his being involved in a state utterly opposed to God, and his call necessitates complete separation from that state of unholiness. And then his commission necessitates his cleansing. Notice, he is going to be the mouthpiece of the Lord in judgement. He is going, in effect, to fix the state of this people from the divine side. He is saying: 'You have closed your eyes, then you shall not see if you want to. You have closed your ears, then you shall not hear, even if you want to hear. You have hardened your heart, then you will not be able to turn your heart to the Lord, even when you want to. You have lived for yourselves; very well, the Lord hands you over, and the Lord will not accept you, even when you turn to Him.' Now, nobody can take action of that kind and at the same time be involved in the condition.

You and I, if we are going to preach, to testify, must be altogether *outside* of the condition against which we are testifying, or else we are testifying against ourselves. So that this man Isaiah, in order to fulfil his commission, must be separated and cleansed from the condition against which he is to testify, and he must not become involved in the judgements which he is to declare, so that holiness governs everything here. It is the thing which governs the judgement of God. It is the question of holiness that produces judgement. It is also the thing which governs the call of God and the commission of God. Holiness is basic, and the background to everything in the divine activities. God's judgement against sinners, and His methods with His servants; everything is directed by holiness.

God's Throne

Then there is this other thing. The throne, which is the throne of infinite holiness, and the majesty of that throne, is based upon holiness. The very majesty of the Lord is the majesty of His holiness. He is in that position as here represented, because of holiness. We must remember that in passages like this in Isaiah and elsewhere, the throne is not just the throne of the Infinite, Almighty, Eternal God. That is, it is not the throne of the Almighty One alone. It is that, but that is not the feature of the throne in this portion, and in others. It is the throne of *holiness*, but that holiness is by reason of something having been done. It is comparable with Philippians 2:9: "Wherefore God highly exalted Him, and gave Him the Name which is above every name". It is comparable with the Hebrew letter: "We see Jesus... crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9), because of the suffering of death. Something has been done in relation to sin which establishes that throne in holiness, and gives to that throne the right to judge sin. It is not just the judgement of men as creatures, under the hand of an Almighty God. It is the judgement of a sinful state under a holy state. There is all the difference between a potentate upon his throne, governing in sheer majesty because of his superior position, and One who, because of something which has been done in relation to sin, is established in holiness, dealing with an unholy state. It is very important to see that.

The Lamb's Worthiness

I want to point out the difference which is marked in the two chapters in the Book of the Revelation by this very law, that first of all you have a song in heaven: "Worthy art thou, O Lord... for thou didst create all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). Then the next chapter brings in a new scene, and there is presented the sealed book. And this is not the book of grace, this is the sealed book of judgement. The apostle says that he looked to see who would unlock the book, open the seals, but there was no one found who could unlock those seals and open that book of judgement. And he says: "I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open the book... and one of the elders said unto me, 'Weep not: behold; the Lion that is of the tribe of Judah... has overcome to open the book' and I saw... a Lamb..." (Rev. 5:4-6). And then another song is heard immediately: "Worthy art thou... to open the seals thereof: for thou... didst purchase unto God with thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Rev. 5:9). The first "Worthy art thou" is on the basis of creation, but that was not a sufficient worthiness to unlock the seals of judgement, because judgement is not merely upon the basis of creation. Judgement is upon the basis of *redemption*. Our attitude is not towards the Creator, but towards the Redeemer: not towards God in His creative power, but towards God in His redemptive work. Judgement is based upon that. We shall never be judged by God simply because we did not recognise Him as Creator. The judgement will be because men did not recognise His *redemption*. So that the Lamb comes in with a superior worthiness to creation, because of redemption.

The Throne and the Altar

That is what is here. It is holiness that governs. The throne comes in as the throne of holiness. But note: in relation to this unholiness in which the prophet is involved, from which he has to be separated in order to be God's instrument, the throne does not, even in its holiness, directly operate. It operates through the altar. There is the throne; there is the altar. The throne does not directly deal with him; the throne comes to him *through the altar*. The throne always works through the Cross. That infinite holiness can only be made good in us through the Cross, the blood of His Cross. There is no gift of holiness, there is no cleansing, there is no deliverance, there is no separation, there is no commission, only on the ground of the making active and experimental in our own hearts of the work of His Cross. The throne, in all its wonderful power, moves by way of the altar. The throne brings in a terrible consciousness of conviction of unholiness, and brings from the heart a cry, but the throne cannot in that direct way deliver us. It can only condemn us and make us aware that there is a holiness before which we cannot stand. How shall we live before such a throne? How can we be delivered from death in the presence of that infinite holiness, and the impact of that holiness upon our sinful state? By being led to the altar, by being brought to the precious blood, and when the cry is wrung from the heart concerning an unholy state, which carries with it a cry to be delivered therefrom, "Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (Isa. 6:6-7). Then everything else follows and the way is open for all else in the way of commission and authority.

The point is, when all has been said, that everything hangs upon the holiness which is produced by a living application of the Cross to our hearts in the power of that throne; the power of that holiness operating through the Cross of the Lord Jesus in our hearts. Whatever may be the state, whether it be general or particular in the case of Isaiah, it seems that he focused the whole question upon what is implied by "unclean lips". He did not mean that he and his people were guilty of language which was not right. What is meant in the Scriptures by "unclean lips" is that things were said with the lips

which were not true in the heart; a false profession of allegiance or faithfulness to God. Yet they said: "Wherein have we robbed Thee?" (Mal. 3:8). All the time professing to be the Lord's, professing and declaring themselves, and yet contradicting in their hearts. So that the lips were unclean by reason of a life which contradicted the thing. It was a lie. What they were saying was not the truth in their own hearts.

That was Israel's state. It was not that they were outwardly, voluntarily, manifestly blaspheming the Lord and declaring that they would have nothing to do with Him, but they were keeping up the old system and professing to be what they were not. That is, they were uttering a lie, and their lips were defiled.

Ministry and Holiness

It may be specific in our case. Lips may in that general sense be defiled, unclean. They may be in a more specific sense unclean. We can never fulfil a ministry of holiness, never bring home to others their sin, never be a voice of judgement against wrong if in either general or specific ways our lips are unclean. Lips may be unclean by empty talk, gossip, criticism; not intentionally — for who would intentionally injure the Lord's interests — but just letting ourselves talk. And in the end there is mischief, there is a seed sown unintentionally that bears a crop.

It may be lips, it may be other things, but with the Lord it is all a question of holiness. It is not our thought to deal with specific sins, but it is our leading just to point out this matter of holiness, which is basic to everything. Holiness has to work out in every part. We can be unclean by what we allow ourselves to listen to. Sometimes it would be the maintaining of holiness before the Lord for us to say, "I do not want to hear that, that is not good, that is not glorifying to the Lord, we are not going to get anywhere by that, it is only death and injury along that line."

It may be eyes. Sometimes the question of holiness is bound up with our refusing to take account of some things. There are many things that in responsibility we have to take account of, but there are times when we could afford to shut our minds to some things because they are only going to lead to an unholy state. It is all a question of holiness, because holiness is Life. Leviticus 16 says with that object: "...that he die not" (Lev. 16:2,13). This all relates to Aaron going into the most holy place and not dying before the presence of infinite holiness, having on the garments of holiness, and taking the precious blood. All the garments are for every part of the man, that his whole flesh be covered up, "that he die not", when he comes into the presence of the Lord. The Lord says, in a full and inclusive way, that there must be Life in everything, in all work, in all service, in all relationships, and it is a question of holiness. If there is talk that is not holy, then there is death. If there is listening that is not holy, then there is death. If there is taking account in an unholy way, then there is death. Holiness is Life; unholiness is always spiritual death. The altar works by reason of the throne and the throne works through the altar.

Christ Triumphant

One other word. It is a very blessed thing to realise what these two things do say, the throne and the altar. You have two pictures. That altar is the Lord Jesus, that blood is His blood, that sacrifice is His sacrifice, that live coal is the Holy Spirit working in relation to the work of the Lord Jesus in His Cross. And yet at the same time, that throne is just as much the Lord Jesus as that Cross, that altar and that sacrifice. These are both the Lord Jesus, the two things in Leviticus 16 making one thing. The ram for Azazel — the wilderness, the unknown land, bearing sin, and the ram offered to God and accepted, are really one sacrifice in two halves. One bearing sin and carrying sin away out of God's sight, out of

God's remembrance, into an unknown land. At the same time the other side of the offering coming up into God's presence, being accepted, and going right through. They represent the two aspects of Christ. One the altar, the Cross: "My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" — forsaking sin. The other side: accepted and in the throne. But the fact that He is in the throne, the fact that you see Christ there, is the great declaration of the fact that that Cross was absolutely successful and triumphant, that all that the Cross represented was perfect, complete in its result, and that He occupies the throne by reason of the once and for all perfection of the work of His Cross, and He never sets that aside. In His throne He says, I witness to that all the time, to the perfection of that. Fellowship with the throne means that we stand absolutely in the completed, perfected work of His Cross. Israel was losing fellowship with the throne because all that that altar represented had not become real in their experience.

You see what the altar does. It declares to us that the thing has been done fully, finally, perfectly, and that there can be fellowship with the throne. It works both ways. Not only does the throne work through the altar to us, but we have perfect fellowship with the throne because of the altar. We are today able to stand in the presence of infinite holiness, because we by faith have recognised the perfection of the work of Christ's Cross, where there is no fear, and yet we must recognise that that Cross and that precious blood demand that at every point unholiness is put away.