

A Radical Encounter with God

Seeing the God that Isaiah saw

Greg Haslam

New Wine Press

New Wine Ministries
PO Box 17
Chichester
West Sussex
United Kingdom
PO19 2AW

Copyright © 2007 Greg Haslam

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the publisher. Short extracts may be used for review purposes.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Other versions used are:

NEB – New English Bible, copyright © 1961, 1970, 1989 by The Delegates of Oxford University Press and The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press.

ISBN 978–1–905991–03–7

Typeset by CRB Associates, Reepham, Norfolk
Cover design by CCD, www.ccdgroup.co.uk
Author photo by Joshua Fletcher, www.fletchphotography.com
Printed in Malta

Contents

	Isaiah's commission	4
	Introduction	5
<i>Chapter 1</i>	Joyless, tired religion	7
<i>Chapter 2</i>	"I'll give you a call some time . . ."	15
<i>Chapter 3</i>	Seeing the invisible	25
<i>Chapter 4</i>	Encountering the Living God	35
<i>Chapter 5</i>	Look, and look again	45
<i>Chapter 6</i>	"Holy, holy, holy"	57
<i>Chapter 7</i>	When God draws near	75
<i>Chapter 8</i>	The Priest with a dirty mouth	85
<i>Chapter 9</i>	Who switched the price tags?	99
<i>Chapter 10</i>	"And how do you plead?"	113
<i>Chapter 11</i>	Fire from God's altar	131
<i>Chapter 12</i>	The first day of the rest of your life	143

Isaiah's commission

*“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne,
high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.*

*Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they
covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they
were flying. And they were calling to one another:*

*‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’*

*At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook
and the temple was filled with smoke.*

*‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips,
and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’*

*Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand,
which he had taken with tongs from the altar.*

*With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips;
your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’*

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send?
And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’*

He said, ‘Go and tell this people:

*“Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.*

*Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull and close their eyes.*

*Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,*

*understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”’’*

(Isaiah 6:1–10)

Introduction

This book began as a series of sermons I preached on Isaiah chapter 6 at Westminster Chapel during September and October, 2003. It was an endeavour I embarked on with some trepidation. The theologian and teacher Don Carson, as he began teaching a series of messages (not on Isaiah 6), once said, “I am rarely intimidated by looking into the eyes of the various congregations I’m privileged to minister to. But I am often intimidated by looking at some texts of the Bible.” I know exactly what he means. There are some verses in the Bible that I have never preached on, nor do I have any intention of doing so! Not until I’m ready, at least, because I am still overawed by the depth and complexity of them. I felt the same way as I began to unpack the opening verses of Isaiah chapter 6 to the congregation at the Chapel. Bible commentator Barry Webb has called Isaiah, “the most theologically significant book in the Old Testament”. I would not argue with that. It is powerful stuff!

Experienced mountain climbers know that any major expedition to be undertaken will be preceded by detailed preparation. A great deal of thought, planning and preparation will take place before anyone ever sets foot on a mountain. Climbers will set up base camps along the way stocked with supplies to sustain them on what they know will be an arduous journey, and they know that achieving their goal of conquering the mountain will take time and perseverance. The ascent always begins on the lower slopes.

Here, I feel I am beginning on the lower slopes of Isaiah 6, but we have a mountain ahead of us! To get the most out of this journey you will need to prepare your heart to encounter God. Otherwise, it will be easy to lose your footing and never reach the summit, consequently missing the “view” that God has for you there. Rather than risk missing out, I ask you to determine now to engage with me on this journey and to ask yourself, “What does God want to say and do in my life?” Be prepared for God to do whatever He needs to do in you. My prayer is that you will encounter God in a fresh and vital way as you read on.

Greg Haslam

August 2007

Joyless, tired religion

Are you more than a little bored with your Christian life? Are you bored with your faith? Are you even bored, dare I say it, with God? Take a little time to reflect and answer these questions as honestly as possible. If the answer to any of them is “yes” or even “maybe” then you have probably become too religious! Thomas Kelly said, “People nowadays take time far more seriously than they do eternity.” If you are a bit bored with your faith and definitely with church life, then you have fallen into the same trap. You’ve lost sight of the bigger picture because you have become bogged down by the mundane, temporal issues of life. Please realise that there is so much more for you and for your life beyond that which you experience now.

Early one Sunday morning, as I listened to the radio before preparing for our morning meeting, I heard an interview that I found more than a little disturbing. The writer and broadcaster Claire Rayner was being interviewed by the Radio 4 presenter Eddie Mair about a time in her life when she had suffered from a serious illness. She had been critically ill, in fact, and spent a long time in intensive care with friends and family fearing that she would not survive. She spoke of the emotions she experienced as it seemed that her entire world was collapsing around her, explaining that she had “turned inwards” and as a result caused her family great difficulty and distress during that testing time.

Mair asked if, during her brush with death, she had had a “supernatural” experience of any kind and if so, had she seen God? She replied flatly, “No. I am a humanist. An atheist humanist. In fact, I’m proud to say I’m the president of the British Humanist Association. Please come and join us!” But Mair persisted with the line of questioning and asked her, “Did you ever pray?” to which Rayner replied, “Who’s to pray to? I don’t want to sound rude to people who are God-believers, but it would be like praying to the tooth fairy or Santa Claus. It wouldn’t make sense to me.”¹

This lady doesn’t pray because she insists there is nobody there to answer. Whenever I hear people talk like this it disturbs my spirit. It makes me feel indignant because it robs God of the honour He deserves. She recovered from her illness, but the God who restores people to life – many times without being asked – went un-thanked and un-acknowledged in the process.

One of the stated aims of the British Humanist Association to which Rayner belongs is “to help humanists and other non-religious people to gain confidence in their beliefs and build a foundation from which to live their lives with integrity”. Ironically, it seems that even people with no belief system are prone to base their lives on one set of beliefs or another!

What came so clearly to me that morning, listening to that interview, was that *everyone*, without exception, is looking to be a part of something bigger than themselves. They long to be an important part of something significant, something great, something transcendent. Clare Rayner has directed her search for truth along the path of humanism, hoping to find meaning and value there. Even people who confess to being atheist humanists – who by definition do not even acknowledge the existence of God – are looking for something that can bring a sense of transcendence into their normal, earthly lives. They want their lives to count as much as anyone else’s.

We all want to make a difference in the world, but we are consistently sucked into the world’s system, impregnated with its

values, and we easily lose our way. We, as God's people, are no more immune to this than anyone else. We hunger more than most for the transcendent in our lives, because we are aware of its true source, yet, we look still for it in all the wrong places! We are so easily seduced by materialism and pleasure. We are so easily distracted by peripheral concerns. Instead, we the Church should have values that are utterly alternative to the norms and values that govern the culture that surrounds us.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (speaking specifically about the prophetic ministry) summed it up perfectly when he said that our task as the Church is to “nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us”. In other words, we must light the path that will lead people to true meaning and fulfilment in their lives – the path towards an encounter with Almighty God. Those who live outside of Christ are trapped in a stuffy, flat, two-dimensional world – a world in which God has no part and is not acknowledged in any way. They long to get out and experience a quality and richness to their life that is presently missing. But how to find it?

The search for transcendence

All over the world people are looking for experiences beyond the mundane. I have witnessed it in India amongst the slum dwellers who will spend their last few rupees on a visit to the cinema in an attempt to escape the desperation of their poverty. By watching a Bollywood musical they are, for a couple of hours at least, transported into a magical world of wealth, romance, music and harmony that is utterly in contrast to their squalid existence. But, equally, it could be the Sheffield steel worker who gets paralytic at the pub all weekend before going back to the tedious dullness of his weekly routine, sweating his guts out in the grime and heat of the

machine shop. Or, it could be the high-powered corporate lawyer who flees the city at the weekend to go paint-balling with his friends in the woods in an effort to escape the stress and pressure of his job.

What all of these people have in common is their search for transcendence – for some experience or encounter that will take them completely out of their normal existence. They are grasping for something beyond themselves, something that will take away the dull ache of life’s emptiness. They are all looking for something exciting to help give meaning and significance to their life.

When you think about it, people try to add meaning to their lives in the oddest ways. There is the guy who spends an inordinate amount of time washing and waxing the stunning 4 × 4 off-roader he has recently acquired. It amounts to a near-religious experience for him. Perhaps he has worked and saved for years for this symbol of success, but what does it really add to his life? What about the person who makes a regular pilgrimage to Oxford Street or Knightsbridge returning with bloated bags from Selfridges and Harrods? What about the person who dreams about how much more enjoyable life will be when they finally buy that massive 46 inch plasma screen TV for the “complete home cinema experience”? If we followed our culture’s manifesto on these matters, as laid out in its powerful advertising campaigns, we could all invest in a wide portfolio of pleasures and diversions for the rest of our lives. But there has to be more to life than this . . . doesn’t there?

There is more!

Whatever you spend your money on or seek to experience, you will always conclude, “There’s got to be more to life than this.” Because, as we should know by now, the novelty of life’s pleasures always wears off in the end.

It has been reported that the top two holiday destinations in the world are Disneyland in Florida and Las Vegas, the gambling capital

of the world in Nevada. More people visit those two places for rest and relaxation than any other place on the planet. One is a gambling centre and the other a pleasure park. The tourist's aim in visiting is to have that "once in a lifetime" blast, and I'm sure many do, but the excitement doesn't last forever and all too quickly "normal service is resumed".

By way of contrast, in recent years hundreds of thousands of Christians have flocked to two other North American destinations in search of a greater spiritual experience – the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship in Canada and the Brownsville Assembly of God church in Pensacola, Florida – and most have had encounters that have proven to be life-changing.

The "experience" to be found at each destination has been significantly different. In Toronto the emphasis has been on a revelation of the Father's love and in Pensacola it has been on the Lord's holiness. John and Carol Arnott in Toronto have led many troubled believers into a new experience of their adoption as children of God. In Pensacola, evangelist Steve Hill has preached God's Word like a blistering blowtorch, scorching and searing deep into the hearts of thousands, so that compromise and sin are burnt out from people's lives. Both experiences have led to many returning home feeling forgiven, cleansed and able to begin to live a radically new life for God.

God's love and God's holiness. These experiences are vital for every one of us to encounter at some point in our Christian pilgrimage. At some point we have to have an overwhelming experience of God if we want to find ourselves in the place where He can really use us.

A.W. Tozer once said, "What first comes into our minds when we are caused to think about God is the most important thing about us." The trouble is that so many of us who profess to follow Christ have only a shallow and superficial view of who God is. What we think about God is very limited indeed because we are caught up in

the kind of self-indulgence and self-centredness that only looks to God for what He can do for us. I believe this is the mindset that pervades much of the modern Church. Many amongst this generation of Christians seem to have lost all sense of the greatness, transcendence, power and majesty of God. We see the Almighty as a kind of “Genie of the Lamp”, ready and available when we summon Him to “grant us three wishes” and make our lives easier – just like that! We have produced, in effect, a Designer Deity to cater for our every need. We have made the Almighty both marketable and manageable.

Putting God in a box

Not only have we endeavoured to impose on God the role of a Cosmic Father Christmas, but church leaders and Christians alike have also tried to put Him in a box and make Him both portable and predictable. After all, we don’t want a God who will do anything unpredictable or uncomfortable! Surely our God would not do anything to shock, surprise or overwhelm us? And He certainly wouldn’t want to destroy anyone! (I think Isaiah would take issue with that). So, we try to restrict God to the confines of our limited perceptions of Him. We all do it in different ways – there are Pentecostal versions, Charismatic versions, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Free Church versions of this box, but it is still a box! We have hung God on a chain and made Him our lucky mascot whose job it is to help us find car parking spaces at the shopping mall on a busy Saturday afternoon. We televise God on the Sunday evening “God-slot” with “religious” programmes that must leave many with the impression that He is a comfortable crutch for old ladies and pimply choir boys who can’t get by in life without Him.

The result of all this is that God has become monochrome and mesmerisingly dull in most people’s minds. As one writer put it, “Years of bringing one emotion to God – a kind of bored solemnity

and at-ease-familiarity – pervades so many church services with total and utter blandness.” This is not the experience that Isaiah had. This is the joyless, tired religion we must escape! No wonder the Church is not “cutting it” in many of the tough inner cities of neo-pagan Britain today. A seeking person could find more of a sense of transcendence in half a bottle of vodka or the candles and smoke of a séance than they could in the average church in Britain. Where is the sense of the all-powerful presence of God in many churches? No wonder people are staying away in their millions. Yet, I believe that God wants to raise up an effective Church – a Church that is successful, not defeated and bogged down in moribund frivolities. And a Church that has been caused to sit up and take notice of God itself will surely cause others to sit up and take notice of Him as well!

Isaiah’s encounter

Isaiah’s experience and knowledge of God probably resembled this disturbing picture of tired religion until, that is, one day in the temple when He encountered God face to face and his world was blown apart. From that moment on he was a changed man. The first five chapters of Isaiah report the staggering, shocking, disturbing words he prophesied to his contemporaries in a backsliding nation. But, Isaiah chapter 6 does not follow on chronologically from those prophecies, it actually precedes them all. These incredibly powerful words with their astonishing depth and foresight were spoken by a man who had been set on fire by Almighty God. These words of such sharpness and magnitude were spoken because, in Isaiah’s words, “*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord*” (emphasis added).

American pastor and theologian John Piper, once commented on his preference of spending time with great eighteenth-century Christian writers like Jonathan Edwards simply because we have

all lived in the twentieth century in an atmosphere that is “too dense with man”. We need to capture and experience once again the weightiness of God. This is why this passage from Isaiah 6 is so significant for us. I believe that we can encounter God in much the same way as Isaiah did, at least in degree. We can hear His voice and know His commission on our lives just as the prophet did. John Piper is right – the reason why so many fail to hear God and connect with their God-given destiny is that almost our whole focus has been upon man. We are just too preoccupied with ourselves, with man and his choices and his preferences, his intellectual biases. We are too preoccupied with political correctness. We are too preoccupied with whether people like us or dislike us. Do you think Isaiah was bothered about such things after he had “seen” the Lord?

Nevertheless, though we have lived in an atmosphere dense with man, deep calls to deep and there is something stirring the hearts of God’s people all over the world and in every stream of Church life. Somehow, over the bored silence of “normal” church we are catching the faint sounds of a distinctive call – the call of God.