

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 26, Isaiah Select Passages, Part 1

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 26, Isaiah Selected Passages, Part 1.

Alright, I'm ready to begin.

Let's have a word of prayer, please. Thank you, Father, for another day. We desire very much to walk with you each day.

We know sometimes the road is rough, sometimes there are surprises, indeed challenges along the way. We thank you that you are a faithful companion for the journey. Indeed, our word from the Hebrew Bible implies one who is bound to us as a friend.

We thank you that you are one, as the Proverbs remind us, a friend that sticks closer than a brother. Thank you for the imagery we have in the Hebrew Bible of the God of Israel, who has become our God through our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray as we study Isaiah and come to know his heart and the heart of the Prophets; we pray that this message will always remain with us and that we always rely on it because it is the word of God.

Give us the grace to live by it and act it out, and I pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

From here to the end of the course, I want to deal with selected passages in Isaiah.

Some of the more important passages, I think, include Isaiah's greatest contributions to theology, to its importance to the New Testament, and that God's people have used to guide them throughout life. Scripture is one of those things that people come back to again and again to shape their attitudes and perspectives on history. There are times when their emotions confuse them and you need a reality check by Scripture because life cannot permanently be lived in the slough of despond and despair.

Right there is one of the greatest contributions that Isaiah gives. He is a prophet of hope because the Messiah and hope are synonymous, that better times are ahead, that the armies you see invading, that the struggles politically with getting a more righteous and more just king in Jerusalem are not things that are going to last forever. God is working out a plan in history.

One of the best things in your textbook by Heschel on the prophets reminds us that the will of God and history are not synonymous, but the actions of individuals and the actions of nations have the ability to either advance or retard the will of God in history. And Isaiah is a prophet, and we have to move really into chapter 6 to find his commissioning. Unlike Ezekiel, unlike Jeremiah, who speaks of God's call on their life as a prophet, Isaiah's commissioning or call is found in chapter 6. I want that to be our focus for today.

This commissioning that he has for the prophetic task takes place as part of what we might call an inaugural vision, a vision of God. And again, going back to where we began this course, you couldn't be a prophet without being confronted by God with this so-called call. You could be a priest by heredity, but you could not be a prophet without that sense that God had called you to that awesome task.

And obviously the greats of scripture wanted to run all the more in the face of that task. Moses had a four-point sermon for God, why he was not the one to go to Pharaoh. And you look at Isaiah's task, I mean how would you like to be ordained to the Christian ministry and be told you would be judged to failure by all the static you were going to get from your congregation.

There's a side to this where Isaiah knew he was going to preach, and as chapter 6 says, those hearts are going to be calloused, the eyes are going to be dim, the ears will be dull, and the response will be nil. That wasn't too encouraging to start right off. But the thing the prophet had going for him was the knowledge that God was calling.

And for Isaiah there was one of these bigger than life visions of God. Notice the text opens in chapter 6, in the year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah came to the throne about 792, he had a 52-year reign down to 740.

So, our date here is pretty accurately not debated by and large by scholars. It's 740. I suggest that our dates for Isaiah are 740 to 680. It probably extends to approximately a 60-year ministry.

Now with Uzziah's death, it marked the passing of a golden age of some spiritual vigor in Judah. At least we know that some very positive things happened in the land. When you turn to 2 Chronicles 26, you have some background material from Uzziah's day and just share a few of those things that happened during that time.

It speaks of his success. He had another name by the way, Azariah, which is sometimes mentioned in scripture. When I say there were some spiritual things that happened.

Ponder 26:5, he set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah who instructed him in the fear of God. And as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper. Right, there is an introductory line about this king of some 52 years.

I can't contemplate 52 years in the White House for any one president. I mean, that's a long period of time. But he was a person at a young age, starting as a teenager to reign at age 16, according to verse 3. And he had rather remarkable success on many fronts.

Economically, he encouraged agriculture and commerce. He built wells in the desert. He expanded the commerce of the Southern Kingdom.

One of his big claims to success was his improvement of the Southern Kingdom, militarily speaking in terms of the protection of his army. He put a standing army onto the field of 307,500 fighting troops. All are equipped more properly than at any other time in the history of Israel up to this point.

And he modernized the army with coats of mail helmets and used bows and arrows. In Jerusalem, he made engines invented by skillful men to be on the towers and the corners to shoot arrows and great stones. And the language here speaks to us in 2 Chronicles 26 of really the one man that did more to modernize the army in Israel's history than any other thing.

And he was victorious over the Ammonites on the Eastern Front. And as he depended on God, he was successful. He did, as many of you know, have a lapse in accountability when he decided that he wanted to burn incense.

The text says in 2 Chronicles 26:16, he grew proud. And he entered the temple and he was accosted by the priests. Uzziah wanted to burn incense on the altar of incense, but there were 80 priests there who withstood King Uzziah and said, it is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord.

So, he wanted to intrude into the priestly office, which was obviously the wrong thing. There was separation of church and state, at least at that point. It would be like a parishioner coming up in a Catholic church, clipping on a collar, and saying, I'd like to conduct the Eucharist today.

Who are you? So out of all of this, of course, he contracted leprosy. The law of leprosy, of course, forbade the social integration of lepers within the community. They were isolated.

They were ostracized, and that's precisely what happened to him. He was removed and could no longer effectively conduct the affairs of the state.

And so, his son, Jotham, took over. And there was really a co-regency at the end of Uzziah's life. But all things being equal, Uzziah was a very positive king of the southern kingdom.

One of the best. I think other real good guys, as the Bible at least talks about the positive things they did, Hezekiah, Josiah, Uzziah, I'd have to put them in the top three in terms of their contributions. Yes? Joe Ash, I certainly would include him as a very positive contribution.

Another good guy. Joe Ash inherited a temple that was in great disrepair. He got the people to contribute to the temple, to bring their silver and gold to the temple, and really made a tremendous contribution to the life of the community where the temple had lay in disrepair for such a long period of time.

Yeah, he would be certainly in the top five for me in terms of his overall positive contributions. Good point. Now in this year the king Uzziah dies, whose name marks what we call the classical or golden age of prophetic writing.

Remember, in the northern kingdom, Amos and Hosea are 8th-century prophets. Isaiah is now coming on as an 8th-century prophet. Micah, who is a contemporary of Isaiah, begins his ministry during this period of time.

So, a lot was going on from the time of Uzziah for a good number of years afterward. And at this time of national mourning, after 52 years, which was a major shift, the king had died, and he said, I saw the Lord. Now, this was some kind of a prophetic vision.

As we know, Amos had his five visions, Zechariah has a series of eight visions in the night, Ezekiel was known for his vision of dry bones and other things. So, this was one of the ways in which God spoke. And so, apparently, in this vision, Isaiah is looking into a temple.

We don't know whether that temple might have been the Jerusalem temple. Many scholars believe it probably was the heavenly temple, of which the Jerusalem temple was the earthly counterpart. But, in any case, the language here begins rather difficult.

It says, I saw the Lord, and yet John 1:18 says, no man has seen the Lord at any time. Exodus 33:20 says, there shall no man see me and live. So, this notion of seeing God, don't get too close, cover your eyes, or, it's not something to pursue.

And yet, one of the most Jewish sections of the New Testament, Matthew's gospel to the Jewish believing community, in the Sermon on the Mount, says, the pure in heart shall see God. Obviously, you can't see God, or no one has seen God, or if you see

God, you're not going to live, and yet the New Testament says you're going to see God, Matthew 5.8. Obviously, it's used in different ways. Jacob has his wrestling match east of the Jordan Valley, and that happens at Paniel, where he sees God.

And that's what Paniel means, the face of God, who was this angelic visitor that had that wrestling ability, and also that ability to rename Jacob to the one who wrestles, or struggles, or strives with God. Obviously, it was a temporary form, or representative of God, some kind of symbolic representation, because God is a spirit, as the Westminster Catechism says, in whom we all find our source, support, and end. And so, God being a spirit, whatever people see, we do know his eternal essence is veiled, and whatever anyone may claim to see in scripture of God is really only a temporary, visible view of God.

Some kind of symbolic representation, such as the angel of the Lord, comes and speaks with God's authority in the Old Testament. So, whatever he sees on this throne is some kind of a human form in this vision, and this human form symbolizes the divine. So, to sum up, then, to say you've seen God, it certainly is employed in a variety of different ways in scripture.

So, his essence is and must be invisible, but he may be seen in a number of different manifestations of his glory, or in human form. It says he saw Adonai, capital A, small o-r-d, and he saw the Lord Ram. This is the founder of our college, Adonai Ram.

He saw the Lord High. High in the sense of lifted up and exalted. And this word Adonai, not the four capital letters, it's not the Tetragrammaton, it's used obviously of the divine ruler, the sovereign, to whom all people are subject, and to whom all mankind is related as a servant.

So, this vision then, of the Lord sitting on a throne, again sets up the beginning of a contrast we're going to see in chapter 6. Between the servant, if you will, and the master. In fact, that's a very good way to translate Adonai. It's used in human relationships of dependence, or superior relationship to one who is subject to and dependent on another.

Of course, further on in this, we're going to see how his own sense of sinfulness with which he is overcome in light of this one who is so highly exalted. Again, there's a contrast. This is one of the great chapters in scripture that really shows the difference between human beings and the one that we are called to serve.

There's a moral contrast. There's a contrast in terms of who is great in this thing and who is subject and submissive in the sense of calling. So, this title, Adonai, indicates the fact that God is the owner of each member of the human family, including the prophet, and claims the unrestricted obedience of him.

He comes as a humble servant into this calling of being a prophet. Now, this one sitting on the throne, high and lifted up, the same expression; by the way, the same two words found here in the Hebrew are repeated in 57:15 as a title for the God of Israel. So, this is what the high and the lofty one says.

This is what Ram. And you see in Israel, there are many places like, take Samuel's hometown, Ramah. Ram has this idea of being lifted up and high, and that's where you want to build a city.

Ramallah, in the West Bank, is a major city. In Arabic, simply the confession, Allah is exalted. Ramallah.

So, he has these two words, and later they get picked up as really the expression for the high and the exalted one. Who is sitting on a throne that speaks to us of sovereignty? His robe, or the train of his robe, probably looks like a long, long, long train of a wedding dress.

And in the ancient world, the longer your robe symbolized, the more power and authority you had. And even the son of man, in the early part of Revelation, who is being depicted for his wisdom and snowy white hair, says Revelation 1. Notice how Revelation dips into the illusions. Ramez, as the rabbi sometimes called, hints at certain things with just one word.

But this one in Revelation 1, like a son of man, is dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet. Notice that little expression, Jesus, the son of man, has a robe reaching down to his feet. The idea of length of a robe, again, speaks to authority, speaks to management, speaks to those in charge, where the more abbreviated costumes and the shorter costumes were those who were under the one who has authority.

And that's the key, of course, to understand the Joseph narrative, where Joseph received from Jacob a long robe with sleeves. That made the jealousy among the brothers, not because the robe was colorful or multi-colored. Hey, I just got this plain white drab-looking thing, but he got a colorful robe.

That's not what caused the jealousy. It was the length of the robe that betokened leadership among the brothers. And this younger brother, that was too much for the elder brothers.

Alright, so this train of the robe, the fringe of the royal robe, or the skirts. Psalm 104, verse 2, the Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment. In this temple, around the throne are seraphs.

Now, the Hebrew calls them seraphim. That I am ending, you've seen a number of times, masculine plural ending, typically in Hebrew, not in every case, but in most cases.

So, a seraph would be singular, seraphim would be plural. Depending on your English translation for this text, sometimes people just put the S on seraph and put an English S on there. But cherub, cherubim, seraph, seraphim.

So, whether it's seraphim or seraphs, it's the same word. The root seraph in Hebrew means to burn. And so, this kind of angel, by its definition, is the burning one.

These were winged creatures, apparently in human form, because they're represented as having hands, faces, feet, and probably their ceaseless ministry around the throne is that of praising God, showing forth His divine glory. Seraphim are only mentioned here in the Bible. Now, the cherubim are mentioned more frequently.

We start picking up the theme of the cherubim in the Garden of Eden narrative. And they, of course, make their way all the way to the book of Revelation. They were another form of angel who are apparently called around the throne to reveal the power, majesty, glory, praise of the Almighty.

Notice that these angels around the throne, who are there hovering above, have these six wings. With two, they cover the face. And we have enough art from the ancient world.

Let's take Hammurabi, who stands before the sun god, Shemesh, to receive his laws. And there he is on the stela, shielding his eyes as he stands before the sun god. In a similar way, perhaps, these burning ones around the throne could not gaze directly on God.

See that in Exodus, of course, with Moses, because of the radiance and the brightness of God had to shield his face. So, this kind of modesty and reverence. The modesty extends to the fact that with two of these wings, they covered the feet.

Likely a euphemism for the sexual organs. This expression is used in the Old Testament. Judges 3:24 To urinate is to cover the feet.

That is the literal biblical way of expressing urination. And, of course, if you want to talk about the noun urine, then it is the water of the feet. In fact, that expression is used in Isaiah.

Water of the feet. So, this could be two wings covering the eyes, two covering the genitalia, and the other two used for flying. So, this idea of reverence, of mission in the presence of the Almighty.

And they are calling in an antiphonal manner. If you've ever heard antiphonal singing in a church, which is back and forth, they were calling to one another, back and forth, praising God in an alternative or probably a kind of responsive doxology, if not song. But, don't read the song into it.

One of the great myths that has been read into the Bible is the idea that angels sing. I believe if you check every single place where angels are mentioned, in Scripture, at least, angels don't sing. They say.

Suddenly, there was a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God and saying the biblical text, indicates at the Savior's birth. Maybe they were singing, but the same term is used for speaking or saying in the biblical text. Maybe the Midrash on that stuff as it develops.

One of the big ones was referred to at the Seder, where the one leading the Seder last Wednesday night said, in heaven, all the angels were singing at the demise of Pharaoh and his elite chariots, the hundreds of them that bit the dust. And God said, stop the music. Why should you rejoice even in the overthrow of your enemy? I mean, these are people created in the image of God, so mute it.

Don't be so exuberant in your praise, even when you triumph over your enemies. That's the natural tendency, I guess, of human beings is when somebody gets their comeuppance, as we call it, their just desserts, we act very triumphant about their demise. And yet, God says, be modest in your victory, if you will, because these are human beings, and I take no delight or joy in the death of the wicked.

That's what another prophet said. Do you know which prophet that was? Ezekiel. The words holy, holy, holy are not the Old Testament way of referring to the Trinity.

Here again, we become influenced by our hymnals, and we sometimes read hymnology back into the biblical text. In ancient hymnology, this was known as the Trisagion. Hagios means holy, and thrice holy, Trisagion.

And in Revelation 4:8, again alluding to this language in Isaiah, Isaiah 4:8 talks about the creatures around the throne. There were four living creatures. Day and night, they never stopped saying, not singing, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, is and is to come.

So, obviously, a direct use of the material in Isaiah here. In Judaism, if you go to the synagogue, this expression, which is part of the weekly Shabbat liturgical readings

from the prayer book, is called the Kedushah. And dozens of times I have taken students to the synagogue, and the one making editorial comments for the help of Gordon students, who are trying to process the prayer book and the names of prayers, will say, we will recite the Kedushah on the page such and such.

It's Kadosh, Kadosh, Kedush, Kedushim. We have a whole variety of words that come from this three-letter root, Q-D-S-H, which means to be apart from, to be separate from, the idea of holy. In Judaism, this Kedushah, this prayer which is part of the Amidah, the Amidah is the standing prayer of Judaism, which is said silently and includes what is called the eighteen benedictions.

So, it's stationary; it's repeated standing, but a standard prayer in Judaism. Why three times? Not for the Trinity as the primary purpose here. The primary purpose is for emphasis.

The repetition of phrases, a great parallel to this in Jeremiah, is in chapter 7, verse 4, where the people never thought Jerusalem would be sacked, never mind the temple would be taken over and ransacked. And so, the people were chanting, this is the temple, the temple, the temple of the Lord. And you repeat the temple four times.

Jeremiah 7, verse 4. So, repetition wants to underscore something. And in this particular case, God is infinite in His holiness. Holy, holy, holy cannot be topped.

Holy in the sense of divine perfection, which separates Him from ourselves, who are finite, who are not morally perfect, but also God is separate from us. He has complete freedom from those who are sinful. And He is distinct from creatures.

Certainly, Paul emphasizes that in Romans. Those people in His day were not easily making that distinction between the Creator and the creature. And that's one of the things we have to be very careful about in Eastern religions, it seems to me, with the pantheistic tendencies that want to merge the human and the divine.

And holiness is a reminder that someone is distinct from, separate from, creation. The Hebrew people avoided nature worship. It was the world around them, the Greeks, the Canaanites. They were big-time into nature worship, but not the God of Israel.

He was infinite in His holiness, separate from creation, and yet, He comes to them. Paradox. So much of the Hebrew Bible must be understood as a paradox.

He's also described as the Lord of hosts or the Lord Almighty. Here we come to our second divine name, four capital letters for the Lord, the Tetragrammaton, the Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh, over 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible, used only for the God of Israel, unlike Adonai is used for a wife, to a husband, a servant, to a master, can be used in

human relationships, same with Elohim, can be used to pagan deities, judges, and even angels. But this word is always in capital letters because it's unique; it's God's covenantal name, the one who is the eternal God of covenant faithfulness, the God of the burning bush.

Ehiyah, asher Ehiya, I am who I am, or I will be who I will be, where He reveals Himself in a new way, through the exodus, through the giving of the law at Sinai, as Israel was to come to know by historical expansion the meaning of this name. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the burning bush, now comes to Isaiah, and He's called the Lord of zevaot, used in your hymnal in the chapel. Mighty fortress is our God, Lord zabayot, His name, from age to age the same, and He must win the battle.

That word zabayot is not a corruption of Sabbath, or misprint in the hymnal. It means hosts. Sometimes it refers to the armies of Israel, sometimes for the starry host above, as in the fairest Lord Jesus, all the twinkling starry host, as the hymnal puts it.

But in this particular case, it's used of the angels, the King in the fullness of His glory, surrounded by hosts of angels, governing the universe, as the Almighty One, sitting on the throne, receives the praise, the adoration, of these creatures surrounding Him. The whole earth is full of His glory. God in Search of Man by Heschel is wonderful on this theme: the glory of God is the presence of God.

As a songwriter put it, Every time I see a leaf, or hear a newborn baby cry, or see the sky, I know why I believe. Everything in nature, in a sense, is an argument for the existence and presence of God. His presence fills the universe, both through nature, as the psalmist says, the heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament of His handiwork.

But we know God more than through nature. We know God, as Scripture tells us, through Israel's experience of God in history. At the sound of the voices of these angelic beings, the doorposts, and the thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke, which probably suggests, in this vision, Isaiah was on the outside of the temple, maybe looking in, and he observes the shaking of this structure.

And it's filled with smoke. Now, you take those two words, and what does it conjure up in your biblical computer, your biblical memory? Shaking and smoke. Where do you come with that combination? Does anyone think? Good.

Mount Sinai. Where there was an earthquake, the mountain shook, and it says the smoke on the mountain went up like the smoke of a furnace or a kiln. That was at a point of God's revelation of His presence.

As Deuteronomy says, the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai. And so, the illusion here that we have harked back to Exodus 19 and 20, at what happened at Sinai. Sinai was covered with smoke.

Maybe an illusion also to Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, and the theme is holy here. The holiest day of the year when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies. And what did he take with him? Do you recall? He came into the Holy of Holies with incense.

And that creates, obviously, smoke. And so, the illusions are many. If that is the case, then, above the ark and the cherubim, God was thought to be enthroned.

So, we have another illusion here. Verses 1-4 focus on seeing the Lord. Now, there's a switch.

Verses 5-8, after seeing the Lord, he sees himself. And after 5-8, he's going to see the world when he gets his commissioning and realize how tough things are going to be. So, after 1-4 seeing the Lord, now by contrast, he looks at himself and he says, Woe to me.

The illusion seems to be to the idea of having seen in some way this One who is obviously the God of Israel sitting on the throne and perhaps this idea of seeing God and still living. But, this woe which he expresses may also immediately speak to the contrast between himself, the beholder, and that contrast between himself, the moral contrast between the Holy One of Israel, as he's described elsewhere in the book, and the Prophet himself. And so, immediately, he says, I'm lost, I'm cut off, I'm ruined, I'm destroyed because I'm a man of unclean lips.

For my eyes have seen the King. Now, here's a contrast. The prophecy begins here in chapter 6 in the year that King Uzziah died.

There's a difference between King Uzziah, great as he was, and seeing Thee with a capital K. Ha-Melech, The King. One of the few places in the Hebrew Bible where the God of Israel is described as The King. Martin Buber, who, with Heschel, with the two greatest Jews of the 20th century, having an influence as theologians upon both Jews and Christians, says the history of Israel is described as the story of the kingship of the God of Israel.

His sovereignty. And when you hear the Lord's Prayer, the corporate cry of God's people, your kingship come, your reign, your rule, your sovereignty, still in the synagogue prayer, which concludes every service, which calls for the reign and the rule of God over this earth and all powers and evils that need to be subjected to that reign and to that rule.

So, that idea of ruling, reigning, taking charge. My eyes have seen the King. The King of Kings.

And so, He is going to be called to proclaim the message of that King. A couple of final thoughts, and I'm done. So, one of the seraphs takes a coal from off the altar.

The rabbis comment that the touching of Isaiah's lips is perhaps symbolic of prophetic inspiration. Touching the lips. Certainly, in Isaiah chapter 1, you have something somewhat similar.

In Jeremiah 1.9 it says, The Lord reached out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me, Now I have put my words in your mouth. Which figuratively may represent divine inspiration or God coming to the prophet and saying, You're going to be my spokesperson. It's coming right out of your mouth, and you're going to speak my word.

Others see the fire here from off the altar, coming and touching his lips. What does fire do? Fire, in general, purifies in Scripture. Purifies metal.

Removes dross. The mention of an altar here perhaps reminds us of atonement or forgiveness. The fire also could refer to the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost like tongues of fire.

Fire is a symbol of the divine. Fire, the smoking fire pot, comes with the severing of the animals. The time of Abraham's covenant reminded of God's presence as the fire of the burning bush and so forth.

So, perhaps the fire here could also refer to the Holy Spirit, who would be the one who, in Isaiah's case, would be the source of his prophetic utterances. In any case, any impediment which he may have had is purified. And the fire reminds us of the fact that God is going to touch his mouth and his lips and provide the words that he needs.

And so, he is ready then to do God's will. Who will go for us? Not an allusion to the Trinity. I think probably the angelic beings surrounding the throne.

This is the editorial, we. The church fathers were always anxious to read Trinitarian meaning into the Hebrew Bible. But in the world of polytheism, I think that the last thing God wanted to come across was the fact that God is three.

And while Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be found in the Hebrew Bible in different places, I think the us here makes much more sense in referring to the heavenly court of the Seraphim. It could also be a plural of majesty, where sometimes the plural is simply used for something that exalts or sets apart and stands out. And there are

some of these words in the Hebrew Bible that are put into plural to kind of italicize them.

Elohim is one. Mayim, water, is one. Chaim, the word for life, is one.

Shemayim, the word for heaven, is one. So, the plural sometimes can just simply be used for something that's to be standing out. So, probably not the Trinity here.

We'll pick up there next time and complete the commission. Thank you.

This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 26, Isaiah Selected Passages, Part 1.