



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

“WOE IS ME! I AM RUINED!”

David Anguish

Introduction

1. It seemed that life had conspired against him.

His mother died when he was only 11. His father took him to sea and on a visit back home, he was impounded by the Navy and pressed into service. He escaped, only to be impounded again. But, this time, the Navy traded him to a slave trader, a job he mastered, along with the gross immorality that went along with it. He was eventually imprisoned, and then rescued by one of his father's friends.

In 1748, at the age of 23, he boarded the *Greyhound* and sailed for home. But, a terrible storm left him and his shipmates lost at sea for 27 days before they finally sighted land. That experience drove him back to the faith he had learned at his mother's knee. He became a preacher, and the fire that was lit was used in his nation's movement to eliminate slavery. At age 82, he said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things. I'm a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."

2. Many of us have heard John Newton's story. And we've shared his memory of rescue from the depths: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found; Was blind, but now I see."¹
3. Cognitively, we get it. Newton *had* been a wretch. Anyone rescued from a life like his would want to celebrate. At the emotional level, it's harder. We admit we've sinned, but we've never experienced it like Newton did. We love the song, but may struggle to recall the wretchedness.
4. Then we run into people like Paul and Isaiah. Paul, the apostle, missionary and former blameless Pharisee, nevertheless understood what it meant to be a "wretched man" (Rom. 7:24). Isaiah, the messianic prophet with such stirring passages, expressed his despair in the form of a funeral lament: "Woe is me! For I am lost; . . ." (Isa. 6:5).
5. What did those good men know that we don't? What difference did it make for their lives?

BODY

- I. A Clearer View of Ourselves.

¹ Newton's story and the wording of "Amazing Grace" are taken from Alton H. Howard, ed., *Songs of Faith and Praise* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., Inc., 1994), #s 128, 129.

- A. To understand Isaiah's lament, we must recall what he saw before it (Isa. 6:1-4): he responded as he did because he was overwhelmed with the Lord's holiness (6:5c).
- B. He applied the prophetic funeral lamentation, to himself: "Woe is me!" (6:5)
 1. He was "lost," literally "cut off, doomed to die."²
 - a) "[T]he word properly means 'be silent.' The prophet is constrained to join the praise, but dares not."³
 - b) "There is no coziness here, for God's presence is a source of deep jeopardy."⁴
 2. Furthermore, he was "a man of unclean lips."
 - a) "Unclean lips" is emphatic in the Hebrew, appearing at the beginning of both clauses where it is used.⁵
 - b) It is possible that the thought of Leviticus 13:34 is in view, where the leper was commanded to cover his "upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.'"
 - c) The phrase is significant, given his role as God's *spokesman*: "The vision of God evokes [his] undoing . . . Already in 1:4, the prophet had condemned the community. Now he stands within that community, condemned along with all the others" (Brueggemann, 59).
- C. The most important lesson to learn from Isaiah's lament is just how serious sin is.
 1. It includes acting "contrary to the law of God" (1 John 3:4, NLT).
 2. But, as Isaiah's case shows, its essence is falling short of God's glory (6:3; see Rom. 3:23).
 3. The comparison we are prone to make is with other people; and we pick and choose, highlighting one of their vices in opposition to our virtues.
 4. Isaiah testifies against such action: "We have all become like one who is unclean, . . ." (Isa. 64:6).

II. A More Complete View of God.

- A. The good news of Isaiah 6 is that the glory of the Lord is not all that Isaiah saw of him.
 1. His confession was heard and a seraph applied a coal from the altar, the Lord's presence, to Isaiah's lips (which had been specified as "unclean") (6:6-7a).⁶
 2. The result: Isaiah's "guilt is taken away, and [his] sin atoned for" (6:7).
 - a) This was not easy: the application of the hot coal directly to Isaiah's lips suggests "a dangerous, painful . . . enterprise" (Brueggemann, 59).

² Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* 1:247. (NIV: "Woe to me! . . . I am ruined!")

³ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah* 1-33, Word Biblical Commentary 24: 75.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah* 1-39, Westminster Bible Companion, 59.

⁵ John D. Willis, *Isaiah*, 141.

⁶ I was once asked whether there is any significance in the fact that the seraph put the coal in his hand after taking it from the altar with tongs. None of the several commentaries I've consulted answer that question. It would seem that any significance to the change is at best secondary. In fact, the phrase can be translated in such a way that the apparent distinction between the tongs and the hand does not exist, the understanding being that the seraph flew with the tongs in his hand (Young, 249-250). One suspects that any significance is found in the fact that temple practice provides the setting for the vision. Customarily, tongs were used to remove things from the altar (see Lev. 10:1; 16:12; Num. 16:46), likely because the coal was so hot, but perhaps also to keep from touching the holy altar. But, neither this text nor any other reveal anything about that detail. It is, therefore, only a matter of curiosity, not significant to the point.

- b) It was an act of sheer grace: God reached across the divide (see Isa. 59:1).
 - c) Amazing grace, indeed: Isaiah is granted “a legitimate place in the very presence of God” (Brueggemann, 59).
- B. Isaiah did what Jesus would later define as the essence of kingdom life (Mt. 5:3-6).
- 1. He said, “How blest are those who know their need of God; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs” (v. 3, NEB).
 - 2. He acted on that knowledge by expressing remorse (v. 4), willingness to submit (v. 5), and having a heart determined to do God’s work (v. 6; see Isa. 6:8-13).

Conclusion

- 1. Augustine (354-430) perceptively observed, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”⁷
- 2. But, our sin frustrates that innate longing, for, like Isaiah, when we enter God’s presence, we are faced with our inadequacy. Woe unto us, for we are lost and unclean, “in dire straits, . . . put profoundly at risk . . . ‘reduced to nothing’” (Brueggemann, 59, citing Calvin).
- 3. Left to us, there is nothing we can do about that. But, Isaiah saw another aspect of God’s being, one who reverses our lament, our lostness, and our uncleanness: he removes our guilt and atones for our sins. His Son perfectly completes this for all who properly see God and themselves and accept his grace.

February 24, 2013; revised November 14, 2016
www.davidanguish.com

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, via <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1427207-confessiones>. Accessed Feb. 21, 2013.