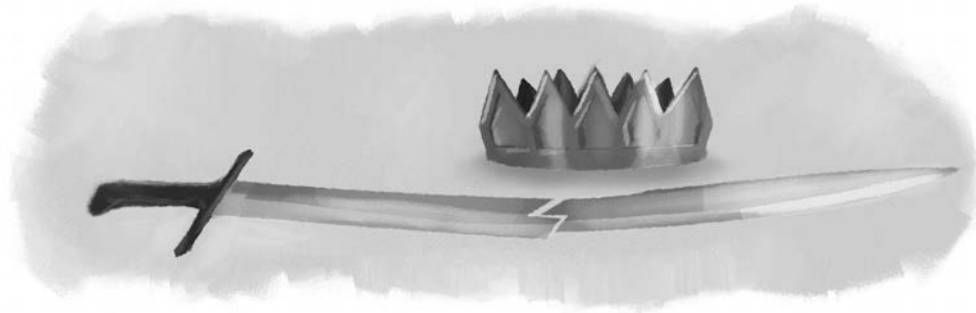


Israel's Leadership Problem



SABBATH—JANUARY 2

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Isaiah 6:1–13; 2 Chronicles 26; Psalm 73; Hebrews 4:14–16; Revelation 5.

MEMORY VERSE: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a very high and wonderful throne. His long robe [clothes] filled the Temple” (Isaiah 6:1, ERV).



“Confucius said, ‘ . . . If people no longer trust their rulers, they are really lost.’ ”

“**ONE OF CONFUCIUS’S FOLLOWERS** asked Confucius about the things that helped a government be a success. Confucius answered: ‘Enough food, enough weapons, and the people’s trust in their leaders.’

“Then the follower asked, ‘But what if you can have only two of those three things. Which one will you let go?’

“ ‘Weapons,’ said Confucius.

“Confucius’s follower asked him, ‘But what if you must choose only one? Which one will you choose to let go?’

“Confucius said, ‘Food. People have always gone hungry since time began. But if people no longer trust their rulers, they are really lost.’ ”—Michael P. Green, editor, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), page 215, adapted.

People want leaders they can trust. When a soldier signed up to serve in the army a second time, the army officer asked him why. The soldier said, “I tried living the life of a citizen. But nobody is leading anyone.”

This week, we will look at the problem with Israel’s leadership and the sad things that happened.

THE KING IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KING! (Isaiah 6:1)

Isaiah 6:1 talks about the death of King Uzziah. Read **2 Chronicles 26** and then answer this question: **When King Uzziah dies, does his death have a special message? What danger does the king's death put his people in?**

King Uzziah's death is a warning to people living in Judah:

1. King Uzziah ruled for a long time. But "when Uzziah became strong, his pride caused him to be destroyed. . . . He went into the LORD's Temple to burn incense [sweet-smelling spices] on the altar" (2 Chronicles 26:16, ERV). The priests, or holy leaders, try to stop Uzziah because he is not from Aaron's line (2 Chronicles 26:18). Only the sons of Aaron can serve as priests. The king gets very angry. In that same moment, God causes leprosy to appear on the face of King Uzziah above his eyes. Leprosy is an awful skin disease. Uzziah is covered with leprosy "until the day he died. He had to live in a separate house. He could not enter the Temple of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 26:21, ICB). That is because King Uzziah is not clean.

2. Do you see that Uzziah and Isaiah are very different? Uzziah tries to enter God's holy temple for the wrong reason. His heart is filled with pride. His behavior shows that his heart is not clean. Isaiah is different from Uzziah. Isaiah confesses that he is weak and full of sin. Isaiah also wants a heart that is clean from sin. God gives Isaiah his wish (Isaiah 6:5–7, ERV). Isaiah is the same as the tax collector in Jesus' picture story (read Luke 18:14, ICB). God makes Isaiah holy and right with Him.

3. Uzziah's skin disease shows us God's people. Their hearts are not clean: "From the bottom of your feet to the top of your head, every part of your body has wounds [deep hurts], cuts, and open sores [openings on the skin that are filled with blood and pus]" (Isaiah 1:6, ERV).

4. Uzziah dies around 740 B.C. When he dies, God's people start to have many problems with the leadership. When a king dies, his people are in danger. But Judah is in awful danger, because Tiglath-pileser the Third becomes king in Assyria a few years before, in 745 B.C. Right away, he starts fighting wars. He makes his country a superpower. He tries to control all the countries in the Near East. In this time of trouble, God encourages Isaiah. God shows Isaiah that He is in control of everything.



Leprosy is an awful skin disease. Uzziah is covered with leprosy "until the day he died . . ." (2 Chronicles 26:21, ICB).

“HOLY, HOLY, HOLY” (Isaiah 6:1–4)

Do you see what happens in Isaiah 6:1–4? The king dies during a difficult time. (The Assyrians start wars with the kings in the Near East.) This news may have scared Isaiah as he wondered who is in control.

And then what happens? God gives Isaiah a dream. In the dream, Isaiah sees God’s glory. His glory shines as bright as fire. God sits on His throne. The seraphim, or six-winged angels, keep saying the words “‘Holy, holy, holy’” (Isaiah 6:3, ERV). The temple floor shakes under Isaiah’s feet. The shaking feels the same as an earthquake. Isaiah looks into the smoke from God that fills the temple. For sure, Isaiah knows that God is in control, even if he feels afraid.



God gives Isaiah a dream. In the dream, Isaiah sees God’s glory.

Where is the Lord in Isaiah’s dream? (Read Isaiah 6:1.) Why does the Lord show Himself to Isaiah in the temple? Why does the Lord not show Himself to anyone else? (Read Exodus 25:8 and Exodus 40:34–38.)

Ezekiel, Daniel, and John the Beloved are far from home when God gives them their special dreams. (Read Ezekiel 1; Daniel 7:9, 10; Revelation 4; and Revelation 5.) They also need God to comfort and encourage them, just as Isaiah does. They all need to know that God is in charge. (Daniel and Ezekiel are taken as prisoners to Babylon after the Babylonian army destroys their own country. The Roman government sends John to live on a lonely island.) For sure, the dreams from God give these men what they need to keep their faith strong.

“Isaiah looks at God’s glory and majesty. He now knows that God is very holy. But God’s people are not holy. They are filled with sin. They are very different from the perfect God who made them.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 307, adapted.

The message of Isaiah’s dream shows us that God is very holy. As a holy God, He commands His people to be holy too. God will give holy hearts and minds to His people. But first, they must turn from their evil ways. Then they must give their hearts to God in faith and obey Him.

We all have had experiences that are difficult. Everything looked hopeless. How did the Lord make you strong during these times? What did you learn from these experiences that you can share with other people?

A NEW MAN (Isaiah 6:5–7)

Only the high priest, or chief holy leader, can meet with God in the Most Holy Room in God's temple on the day that God judges His people. But the high priest can only meet with God if he is covered in smoke. If not, the high priest will die (Leviticus 16:2, 12, 13). But Isaiah sees the Lord in the smoke, and he is not the high priest. What is more, Isaiah is not burning any spices to protect himself!

The temple fills with smoke (Isaiah 6:4). The smoke helps us remember the cloud around God on the day He judged His people (Leviticus 16:2). Isaiah is afraid he will die (compare Exodus 33:20; Judges 6:22, 23). Isaiah cries out. He confesses his sins and his people's sins (Isaiah 6:5). In the same way, the high priest confessed on the day God judged His people (Leviticus 16:21). "Isaiah stands in God's full light in the Most Holy Room. Isaiah knows that he needs God's help. Or he will fail to do what God asks." —Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, page 308, adapted.

Why does the seraph, or angel with six wings, use a burning coal to clean Isaiah's lips (Isaiah 6:6, 7)?

The seraph explains that the burning coal will take away Isaiah's guilt and sin (Isaiah 6:7). The Bible does not tell us what these sins are. Just because the seraph touches Isaiah's lips does not limit Isaiah's sin only to saying wrong words. Lips are a word picture for more than the words someone says. They show us the whole person who says them. Now that Isaiah is clean, he can praise God.

Fire makes things clean. It burns away sin (Numbers 31:23). But the seraph uses a coal from the special, holy fire on the altar. God Himself started the fire. The holy leaders do not let it stop burning (Leviticus 6:12). The reason that someone takes a coal from the altar is so he can burn the sweet-smelling spices. If you look at Leviticus 16:12, 13, you will see that the high priest uses some coals from the altar to light the spices. But in Isaiah 6, the seraph puts the coal on Isaiah's lips and not on the spices. Remember, King Uzziah wanted to offer God burning spices. But in Isaiah 6, Isaiah becomes the same as the burning spices! Holy fire starts the spices burning. The perfume fills God's house. In the same way, holy fire fills Isaiah. He "burns" with the wish to share God's message. That is why God sends Isaiah out to His people.



The seraph, or angel with six wings, puts the coal on Isaiah's lips.

ROYAL COMMAND (Isaiah 6:8)

“Then I heard the Lord’s voice, saying, ‘Who can I send? Who will go for us?’ So I said, ‘Here I am. Send me!’ ” (Isaiah 6:8, ERV).

God asks for a volunteer to share His message. After Isaiah is made clean, he says he will go. In New Testament times, Isaiah would be named an apostle. An apostle is “a person that God sends.”

Many books about prophets, or God’s special messengers, start with a story about how God asked the prophet to work for Him. (Read Jeremiah 1:4–10; Ezekiel 1–3.) It is interesting to see that the book of Isaiah does not start that way. What does that tell us? God must have already called Isaiah to be a prophet, maybe even before the happenings in chapter 6. The Bible shows us that a meeting with God can encourage a prophet, even after he starts his work for God (two examples are Moses in Exodus 34 and Elijah in 1 Kings 19). In other Bible examples, God tells people they are prophets. But in Isaiah 6, Isaiah volunteers to do special work for God. Isaiah 1–5 shows us the time when God first calls Isaiah to be a prophet. After that, God encourages Isaiah at the temple and announces again that Isaiah is His prophet.



John also sees Jesus shown as a lamb that was killed.

God encourages Isaiah at His temple. What proof is there in the Bible that God’s house is a place of encouragement? Read Psalm 73. Pay special attention to verse 17. Also read Hebrews 4:14–16; Hebrews 10:19–23; and Revelation 5. How do all these verses help us answer the question?

The temple of God is filled with His power. It is a place where people who are weak and make mistakes can come and find safety. That includes us. We can be sure that God works to save us because of Jesus. Jesus is our High Priest, or Chief Holy Leader, in heaven.

John also sees Jesus shown as a lamb that was killed. The lamb’s throat is cut open (Revelation 5:6). This is not a pretty picture. The word picture helps us to see that the blood of Jesus saves us. Jesus died on the cross to save everyone who will believe in Him. That is why the Cross is so important to everything Jesus does for us in heaven.

A STRANGE MESSAGE (Isaiah 6:9–13)

God calls Isaiah again to work as His prophet, or special messenger. Why do you think God gives Isaiah a very strange message? Read Isaiah 6:9, 10 for the answer.

We must not think that Isaiah does not understand God or that this message is not important. Jesus says these verses to explain why He taught in picture stories (Matthew 13:13–15).

God does not want anyone to die in sin (2 Peter 3:9). That is why God sends Isaiah to the people living in Judah. That is why God sends Jesus to this earth. Some people accept God's gift of mercy. But other people turn away from it. God keeps on giving them more chances to turn away from sin. But when people refuse to accept the offer of God again and again, their hearts grow harder. God wants to soften their hearts. But they will not let Him. The love of God for us does not change. The only thing that changes is our answer.

Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus keep asking people to come back to God. They continue to ask, even if people turn away from the message. God says to Ezekiel: “ ‘But even if they don't stop sinning, at least they will know that there is a prophet living among them’ ” (Ezekiel 2:5, ERV). God and His servants give people a fair choice and enough warning (compare Ezekiel 3:16–21). So, if the people choose to be destroyed or are made prisoners, God cannot be blamed for their choice (Isaiah 6:11–13).

Knowing all this, how do we understand God's part in making Pharaoh, the King of Egypt's, heart “hard”?

In Exodus 4:21, ERV, God says, “ ‘I will cause Pharaoh to be very stubborn.’ ” Another Bible puts it this way: “ ‘I will make his heart hard’ ” (Exodus 4:21, NLV). This is the first of nine times when God says that He will make Pharaoh's heart hard. But there also are nine times when Pharaoh makes his own heart hard (as an example, see Exodus 8:15, 32; Exodus 9:34). This shows us that Pharaoh had free choice. Without free choice, Pharaoh cannot make his own heart hard. But what does it mean that God also makes Pharaoh's heart hard? It shows us that God did things that showed what was in Pharaoh's heart. This is seen in the choice Pharaoh makes to refuse to believe the miracles and signs God sent. What if Pharaoh accepted these signs? Then the signs would soften his heart, not make it hard.



When people refuse the offer of God again and again, their hearts grow harder. God wants to soften their hearts.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “The people of Israel start sinning so much. Only a few people choose to be loyal to God. They often feel as if they will lose all hope. They feel sad and discouraged. To them, it looks as if the plan of God for Israel is about to fail. For sure, they think that Israel will end up the same as Sodom and Gomorrah.

“At this time, God sends Isaiah to warn the people in Judah about their sins. God calls Isaiah in the last year that Uzziah is king. At first, Isaiah pulls back from God’s task. Isaiah knows that he will meet very stubborn people. They will refuse to listen to him. Isaiah sees that he cannot do the job alone. The stubborn hearts of the people make him feel hopeless. So does their refusal to believe. Should Isaiah give up the work and leave Judah to their worship of false gods? Are the gods of Nineveh to control the earth and not the God of heaven?”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pages 306, 307, adapted.



“Isaiah knows that he will meet very stubborn people. They will refuse to listen to him.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What if someone who does not believe in God asks, “How can you show me that your God is in charge?” What will you answer?
- ② If God is in charge, why do good people suffer? Is Isaiah 1:19, 20 saying that in this life only good things will happen to the loyal people of God and only bad things will happen to people who disobey God? (Compare with Job 1; Job 2; Psalm 37; Psalm 73.) How do we explain that a God of love lets bad things happen? Do we even need to?
- ③ In Isaiah 6, why are there so many connections to the day when God makes His people and His temple clean? This work happens on one day each year in the Old Testament. On this day, also known as the Day of Atonement, God makes His people clean by washing away their sins (Leviticus 16:30) and removing the people who do not obey Him (Leviticus 23:29, 30).

Summary: At a time when Israel has a problem with leadership, Isaiah sees a vision. The vision shows that God is in control of heaven and earth. Isaiah is filled with fear. But God makes him clean and makes him strong. Then Isaiah goes forward to give the message of God to people who have turned away from Him.

HOPE IN A PLANE CRASH

Vladimir Shevil named his daughter Nadezhda. Her name means “hope” in Russian. Vladimir remembers the day that his daughter came home with a new Bible. Someone gave it to her at school in Moldova. Nadezhda is so happy about her new Bible. The 15-year-old girl spends hours reading the Book. Often, she stays up late at night to read it. Vladimir does not go to church very often. He does not like that his daughter spends so much time reading the Bible. He scolds her for wasting time. Then he tells her she should be working in the vegetable garden.

“We do not need the Bible,” Vladimir tells his daughter. “We have church.”

Nadezhda does not argue with her father. She is an obedient daughter. So, she goes outside to work in the garden.

Two years later, doctors tell Nadezhda that she has bone cancer. Nadezhda spends two months in the hospital. The doctors cut off one of her legs at the hip. A year later, in 2001, Nadezhda dies. She is only 18 years old. The heart of Vladimir is broken. He prays to God for answers. “Did this happen because I was a bad father?” he asks.

In July 2002, Vladimir hears about a plane crash in Germany. A plane carrying mail crashes into a Russian plane in the sky. 45 Russian schoolchildren are on the plane from Russia. Everyone in both planes dies. Then, in 2004, a Russian father gets angry about the plane crash. His wife and two children died in the crash. The man hunts down the airport worker who was in charge of air traffic at the airport. The angry man kills the airport worker. Vladimir watches this story on the news. A TV reporter talks to a man whose little girl also died in the crash. The reporter asks the man if he also wants to get even the same as the father who killed the airport worker. The man says, “No. I have hope that I will meet my daughter again.” These words touch the heart of Vladimir. He wants this hope too.

A little while later, Vladimir comes home. His wife waits for him with Nadezhda’s Bible. His wife reads: “Christian brothers, we want you to know for sure about those [loved ones] who have died. You have no reason to have sorrow as those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and then came to life again. Because we believe this, we know that God will bring to life again all those who belong to Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14, NLV).

“Here is our hope,” his wife says. “If we believe in God, we will meet our daughter again.”

Today, Vladimir is a church leader. He talks with joy about his hope in the Second Coming. “Thanks to my daughter, my wife and I found Jesus,” he said. “Now we have hope that we will meet our daughter again.”

INSIDE *Story*

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY



The heart of Vladimir is broken. He prays to God for answers.

