

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – CHARLOTTE

THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE LORD: THE HOLY SEED OF HOPE IN ISAIAH

CHAPTER 6

This paper has not been used to fulfill the requirements for any other class at RTS Charlotte

SUBMITTED TO DR. RICHARD BELCHER

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OT 5150: HEBREW EXEGESIS

## **Proposal:**

The sixth chapter of Isaiah conveys the narrative of the Isaiah's cleansing and his call to ministry. A large focus is often placed on the cleansing narrative of the chapter, where Isaiah laments his uncleanness and the seraphim touches his lips with a coal and says "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." (Isaiah 6:7, NAS95) The rest of the chapter, however, is just as significant. Not only is the message in verses 9 and 10 quoted by Jesus in every gospel, but the prophecy in verses 11-13 exhibits the Lord's justice, mercy, and faithfulness to his covenant promises. The end of Isaiah's call is filled with despair, as God tells Isaiah that the hardness of the people will last until the land is completely desolated. However, the final verse of the call leaves a seed of hope that a faithful remnant will be preserved in the land. This final verse shows that God is true to his character as a merciful and just God.

## **Methodology:**

In order to understand the importance of the message of hope contained at the end of Isaiah chapter 6, this paper will first present a translation and defense of Isaiah chapter 6 verses 3, 5, and 9-13. After this, it will present the historical context of Isaiah 6 as a time of prosperity in Judah that led to spiritual deadness and its literary context as a turning point in the book of Isaiah. Next, it will examine the message of judgement and destruction in verses 9-12 and the implications it has for Judah's future. Verse 13 will then be examined as a unique message of hope, with particular emphasis given to the underlying Hebrew rationale for this hope. Finally, the paper will offer advice for preaching from this passage as an excellent example of the coexistence of God's justice, mercy, and faithfulness to his covenant people.

### Translation of Isaiah 6:3, 5, 9-13

Note: (Small print) denotes pronoun antecedents and italics are words not present in the original Hebrew

English	Hebrew <sup>1</sup>
<sup>3</sup> And he (the seraph from vs 2) called, one to the other <sup>a</sup> and he said “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of Hosts. That which fills <sup>b</sup> all of the earth, His Glory!”	<sup>3</sup> וַיַּהַרְא אֶלְيָה אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאֹת מֶלֶא כָּל־הָאָרֶץ בְּבוֹךְ
<sup>5</sup> And I (Isaiah) said “Woe to me! Surely <sup>c</sup> I am destroyed <sup>d</sup> for <sup>e</sup> a man of unclean lips I am and in the midst of a people of unclean lips I am dwelling <sup>f</sup> that <sup>g</sup> the King, the LORD of Hosts, my eyes have seen.	<sup>5</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אַיִלְלִי כִּי־גָדוֹל מֵתִי כִּי אִישׁ טָמֵא שְׁפָתִים אֲנָכִי יֹשֵׁב פִּי אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צְבָאֹת רָאוּ עִינֵּי
<sup>9</sup> And He (The LORD) said “Go! And say to this people ‘HEAR! <sup>h</sup> But do not understand <sup>i</sup> . SEE! But do not know <sup>j</sup> .’	<sup>9</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר לְךָ וְאַמְرָתָ לְעֵם הָזֶה שְׁמַעַו שְׁמַעוּ וְאַל־תִּבְנֵנוּ וְרָאוּ רָאוּ וְאַל־תִּדְעָנוּ
<sup>10</sup> Make hard <sup>k</sup> the heart of this people and make their ears grow heavy and make sealed their eyes otherwise they will see with their eyes and with their ears they will hear and in their heart they will understand <sup>l</sup> and turn back <sup>m</sup> and there be healing to them <sup>n</sup>	<sup>10</sup> הַשְׁמֵן לְבַדְּהָעֵם הָזֶה וְאַגְּנוּ הַכְּבֵד וְעִינֵּי הַשְׁעֵרָה בְּעִינֵּינוּ וּבְאַגְּנוּ יִשְׁמַע וְלִבְבָּבוּ יִבְנֵן וְשָׁב וְרָפֵא לוֹ
<sup>11</sup> And I (Isaiah) said “How long my Lord?” <sup>o</sup> And he (The LORD) said “Until that <i>time</i> when cities lie desolate from non-existence of dwellers and houses from non-existence of man <sup>q</sup> and the land is desolated, a desolation”	<sup>11</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר עַד־מָתְתִי אַדְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר עַד אֲשֶׁר אָמַן שָׁאוֹעֲרִים מֵאַיִן יוֹשֵׁב וּבָתִים מֵאַיִן אַדְם וְהַאֲדָמָה תִּשְׁאַה שְׁמַמָּה

<sup>1</sup> Karl Elliger, Wilhelm Rudolph, and Adrian Schenker, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2023) Isaiah 6:1-13.

<p><sup>12</sup>And the LORD has completely removed<sup>r</sup> the men and many <i>are</i> the abandoned ones<sup>s</sup> in the inner parts of the land</p>	<p>וַיַּרְתֵּק יְהֹוָה אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיַּרְבֶּה הַשְׁזֹוּבָה בַּקָּרְבָּן הָאָרֶץ</p>
<p><sup>13</sup>And yet<sup>t</sup> in it a tenth <i>will remain</i><sup>u</sup> and it (the tenth) will return. Then it (the land) will be,<sup>v</sup> by burning<sup>w</sup>, like a terebinth and like an oak that in felling <i>have</i> a stump<sup>x</sup> in them; a holy seed is its (the land) stump</p>	<p>וְעַזְׂדָה בָהּ עִשְׂרֵה וְשָׁבָה וְהִתֵּה לְבָעֵר פָאֵלָה וְכָלֹו אָשָׁר בְשַׁלְכָתָשׁ מִצְבָּת בְּמַטְזָרָע הַדָּשָׁן מִצְבָּתָה</p>

### Notes and Justification:

- a) The Hebrew literally translates to “this to this” –an awkward idiom in English, but since the idiom is commonly used in Hebrew in a distributive sense, it is phrased as “one to the other”<sup>2</sup>.
- b) This phrase is interesting in the Hebrew. The Hebrew word **אָלָא** is given by BDB and HALOT as “fullness”<sup>3,4</sup>. However, Bartelt in his commentary on Isaiah points out that when referencing the glory of the Lord, the qal form of the infinitive is used transitively. Since this word is pointed as a noun in this case, it should be translated as a transitive noun, leading to the reading “that which fills”<sup>5</sup>.
- c) The Hebrew particle used here is **כִּי**; this particle has a number of uses and is often translated in a conditional or causal sense, e.g. because or if. In this phrase, however, the particle is used in an assertive manner; Isaiah is emphasizing the certainty of the state of being he experiences due to seeing The Lord, therefore **כִּי** is used here to “assert” his destruction in 6:5a<sup>6</sup>.
- d) The Hebrew root here **דָמָה** has two possible meanings: to be like/resemble or to destroy<sup>7</sup>; HALOT recognizes a third form of **דָמָה** as meaning to be silent/still<sup>8</sup>, which BDB includes under **מָמָה**. Bartelt prefers to see Isaiah as trying to play on both meanings of the verbal root; I prefer a simple meaning of “destroyed” for two reasons. First, it seems that Isaiah is speaking during this narrative, and therefore it would make little sense for him to be silent and speak. Second, the reasons Isaiah

<sup>2</sup> Andrew H. Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12*, Concordia Commentary : A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2024) pg 403.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1st English ed., 5 vols. (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1994) vol. 2 pg 585.

<sup>4</sup> *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 13. Dr., reprinted from the 1906 ed. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010) pg 571.

<sup>5</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pgs 403-406.

<sup>6</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018) pg 163.

<sup>7</sup> *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* pgs 197-198.

<sup>8</sup> Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* vol 1 pg 226.

gives for the state of **למה** he is in line up better with him being in a state of destruction.

- e) Once again, the Hebrew uses the particle **כִּי** here, but in a different sense than 6:5a. Here, it is clear that Isaiah is giving the reason he is destroyed, thus **כִּי** is used in a causal sense<sup>9</sup>.
- f) Most English translations translate the final verb of this phrase **יַשְׁבַּ** as “I dwell”. The parsing of the verb, however, is an active participle. In this case the participle imparts a continuous sense of the verb. While “I dwell” is simpler English than “I am dwelling”, the rendering “I am dwelling” better preserves the state implied by the participle conjugation<sup>10</sup>.
- g) Once again, the Hebrew particle **כִּי** is used here as a transition particle; however, it is used in a different manner than the previous two. In this situation, Isaiah is clarifying why the facts that his lips are unclean and that he lives in an unclean people causes his destruction<sup>11</sup>.
- h) The original Hebrew phrase for **HEAR** is **שִׁמְעֵנִי** which is the Qal 2mp imperative of **עָמַשׁ** followed by the Qal infinitive absolute (inf abs) of the same root. This pairing of a finite verb form with an inf abs uses the inf abs to emphasize the finite verb it is paired with<sup>12</sup>. English does not have a good way to verbally communicate the level of emphasis implied by the inf abs, therefore I’ve decided to stylize the command in all caps in an attempt to visually represent the emphasis given by the inf abs.
- i) The Hebrew verb for ‘understand’ is parsed as an imperfect verb. This implies a sense of “incompleteness” that is hard to communicate with English<sup>13</sup>. The phrase should be interpreted in a way that implies the lack of understanding of the Israelites is continual and unremedied.
- j) See previous notes for the explanation of the all-caps stylization and the implication of the verb “know”) (The Hebrew has a conjunctive **וְ** connecting the HEAR and SEE clauses. This conjunction is left out to improve the flow of the English and the fact that the conjunction does not affect the meaning of the verse.
- k) The use of the Hebrew verb form of **רָמַשׁ** is rare and literally means “make fat”; its normal use is a noun form relating to oil. Here it is a hiphil imperative, meaning that The Lord is commanding Isaiah to “make fat” the hearts of the people; the only other time this root is used as a verb with reference to one’s heart is in Deuteronomy 32:15, describing the fattening of Jeshurun’s heart before their rejection of the Lord. This usage implies that while the literal translation would be “make fat”, a more accurate translation for modern English readers would be “make hard”, as this communicates the meaning of the verb more clearly<sup>14</sup>.
- l) The use of the Hebrew conjunction **נִפְגַּשׁ** implies a negative consequence of an action<sup>15</sup>. English translations are somewhat split between the phrasing given above and the older version “lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears”. Here I have chosen the phrasing of “otherwise they will see” because I believe it better communicates the causality given by **נִפְגַּשׁ**. English translations which use the word

<sup>9</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 160.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 192.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 161.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 88.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 69.

<sup>14</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pg 410.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, pg 166.

“otherwise” always follow it with a ‘might’, implying that even if the people were able to hear, it is not certain they would see and/or hear. **וְ**, however, implies causality, meaning that the negative result is not conditional, but a result. ‘Will’ communicates this resultant feeling better than ‘might’<sup>16</sup>.

- m) There is debate as to whether this phrase **וְשָׁבָת** is a separate clause from the following **רִפְאָה** verb or if they are a joint construction. If they are a joint construction, **וְשָׁבָת** would be a helper verb to **רִפְאָה** and translated as “surely”. I prefer a two-clause reading due to the presence of the **וְ** conjunction on both **שׁוֹבֵת** and **רִפְאָה**. Additionally, turning back is the would be the obvious result if the people were able to hear, see, and understand. Therefore, it makes sense to treat this verb as a separate clause from the one that follows<sup>17</sup>.
- n) The literal reading of the verb phrase **רִפְאָה לוֹ** is “there is healing to them”. While this phrasing preserves the idea that healing is provided to the people from an external source, it is very awkward in English when combined with the causative nature of the ‘and’. Additionally, ‘is’ loses the conditional feeling instituted by the **וְ** earlier in the verse. Substituting the word ‘be’ for ‘is’ removes the awkward English of ‘and there is healing to them’ while also preserving the conditional nature of the phrase lingering from the earlier **וְ** conjunction<sup>18</sup>.
- o) The literal Hebrew translation here is ‘until what time?’. However, that expression is clunky in English and struggles to communicate the idea that Isaiah is asking how long the people will be unable to see, hear, or understand. Translating it as ‘How long’ links better to what Isaiah is asking about while preserving the sense of a question of time.
- p) This Hebrew phrase can be translated multiple ways – the specific Hebrew under investigation here is **עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־שָׁאָו עָרִים**. The extremely wooden translation of these three words, ignoring any composite meaning, would be “until that when cities lay desolate”. Normally **מִן** translates to some type of conditional; however, Gesenius’ grammar identifies a situation when it can be translated as “when”, those situations being when it is conjunctive with “actions or facts, which are meant to be indicated as existing in the future in a completed state.”<sup>19</sup>. Since the wooden translation is obviously missing elements necessary to make clear sense in English, it must be changed to better reflect the meaning of the passage. Most English translations decide to remove the articles **אֲשֶׁר** and **מִן** and simply translate the phrase “until cities lie desolate”. I prefer to keep each Hebrew word present in the English and add in the word “time” between “that” and “when” so that the final translation is “until that *time* when cities lie desolate.” I believe this translation is better as its meaning is identical to “until cities lie desolate” and it provides a clearer one-to-one word correlation with the Hebrew text.
- q) The Hebrew phrase used here for “from non-existence of” is a single compound word: **מִן־אֲוֹן**. This word combines the construct form of the Hebrew particle of non-existence, **אֲוֹן** with the Hebrew preposition **מִן**. **מִן** is normally translated as some variant of “from” and has a range of meanings; in this situation, it seems the best way

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 166.

<sup>17</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pg 412.

<sup>18</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pg 413.

<sup>19</sup> Wilhelm Gesenius, Emil Kautzsch, and Arthur E. Cowley, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2. Engl. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1976) pg 483, ss 1060.

to interpret its meaning is implying a causal relationship<sup>20</sup>, namely that the city from 6:11a lies desolate because there are no dwellers. This trend continues into the second phrase “houses from the non-existence of man” as a form of ellipsis, a phenomenon in Hebrew poetry where an essential element of the first line is dropped in the second. In essence, this means the non-ellipsis form of the text would read “when cities lie desolate from non-existence of dwellers and houses lie desolate from non-existence of man.” This translation, while somewhat unwieldy, again better correlates to the specific wording of the Hebrew while also successfully communicating the casual nature associated with the **לְ** preposition used. Most English versions simply take this compound preposition to mean “without”, essentially disregarding any input of the **לְ** preposition to the compound phrase. The translation above finds support in the Septuagint, where the English translation of the Greek is “Until cities become desolate because they are not inhabited and houses, because there are no people”<sup>21</sup>.

- r) The Hebrew verb for ‘remove’ used here is **רָקַע**. The standard definition of the word from HALOT is “to be distant”<sup>22</sup>. The verbal stem in this use is in the piel, which for intransitive verbs such as this transform the meaning to a transitive and emphatic sense<sup>23</sup>, implying a sense of complete removal.
- s) Hebrew often uses non-verbal clauses to represent adjectives; in this case rather than use a verb to characterize qualities about “the abandoned one”, the Hebrew simply adds on the adjective **רָבָה** in a predicate sense, seen by the fact that **רָבָה** and **הָעֹזֶבֶת** agree in number and gender but not definiteness<sup>24</sup>.
- t) **וְ** implies a continual nature of something; in this case, it is referencing the tenth which will appear in the next couple words. In this case it is used in a persistence manner, implying that despite the Lord completely removing men from the land, a tenth will continue to remain<sup>25</sup>.
- u) The original Hebrew lacks the “will remain” clause added here. This phrase is added based on the persistence nature of the **וְ** from earlier to make clear the idea that the tenth will remain alive despite The Lord’s removal of all men.
- v) Modern translations treat **הַבָּשָׂר** and **הַיּוֹת** as a hendiadys construction, where **הַבָּשָׂר** “helps” **הַיּוֹת** and imparts a sense of repeating, i.e. that “it will again be”<sup>26,27</sup>. This translation assumes that the subject of **הַבָּשָׂר** and **הַיּוֹת** is shared, namely the tenth. However, if the verbs have different subjects, with the subject of **הַבָּשָׂר** being the tenth and the subject of **הַיּוֹת** being the land, the translation given above is plausible and clears up confusion as to the meaning of the verse. Translating the **וְ** conjunction in a conditional manner helps to communicate that through the return of the people, the land has become like the terebinth and the oak that follows<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* vol 2 pg 594.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) Isaiah 6:11.

<sup>22</sup> Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* vol 3 pgs 1222-1223.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 54.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pgs 33-34.

<sup>25</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 150.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Subsidia Biblica 27 (Roma: Pontificio istituto biblico, 2006) pg 610, ss 177b.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew H. Bartelt and Andrew Steinmann, *Fundamental Biblical Hebrew* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013) pg 215.

<sup>28</sup> Arnold, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* pg 158.

- w) Here the infinitive construct (inf cons) of the verb בָּעַר, to burn, is used. The הַ preposition attached to the inf cons is used in a complementary sense<sup>29</sup>. Hebrew word order is flexible; therefore, there is freedom as to where this inf cons applies its complementary sense in the sentence. The rest of the verse compares the land to qualities of an oak and terebinth; this inf cons works to say that the land will be like the terebinth and the oak “by burning”, i.e. that the qualities of the land will be like those of a felled terebinth and oak.
- x) The Hebrew word used for stump here is תְּבַשֵּׂל; the other times this word is used it references the sacred stones used in cultic high places; the main reason it is translated as stump here is because it seems to reference the two trees mentioned previously<sup>30,31</sup>.

### **Historical and Literary Context of Isaiah 6:1-13**

The historical setting of Isaiah chapter 6 offers the rare ability to date with certainty a prophetic message. The passage begins “in the year that King Uzziah died”, dating this narrative to 739 B.C. Uzziah’s death marked the end of a time of significant economic prosperity and stability for the land of Judah; Uzziah was responsible for a number of building projects, military successes, and agricultural developments throughout his reign<sup>32</sup>. The literary context of this passage is more complicated. Namely, there is significant debate as to whether this call narrative is the original call of Isaiah or whether it is a restatement of his call. J.A. Alexander favors the idea that the vision was meant as an encouragement to

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<sup>29</sup> Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar*, 3rd edition., Zondervan Language Basics Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019) pg 223.

<sup>30</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pg 417.

<sup>31</sup> There is significant debate over the meaning of this middle section of v 13. The BHS proposes an emendation to the text where a final הַ is added to the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר, making it אֲשֶׁרְהָ, or “Asherah” the goddess. The reason behind this is that the 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> reading of the text has בְּמַה instead of בְּמָה. בְּמַה could either simply be “in them” with a final הַ added or it could also mean a “high place”. If it is taken to mean high place, then by combining the Qumran reading and the proposed emendation to the Masoretic text it would translate to “like a terebinth or an oak, an Asherah, when cut down, is the sacred stone of a high place”. Bartelt gives a more detailed summary as to why this emendation is not likely the correct reading depending on the physical spacing of the word בְּמַה in the Qumran text and בְּמָה in the Masoretic text. That being said, there is definitely a play on words around the idea of cultic sacred stones being used by Isaiah here. One possible interpretation is that he is trying to draw a parallel of the persistence of cultic high places in Israel to the persistence of the faithful remnant. In essence he might be trying to subtly say “the faithful remnant will persist in the land with the same stubbornness cultic sacred stones did before they were destroyed”. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see Bartelt, *Isaiah* pgs 416-421

<sup>32</sup> John Mackay, *Isaiah*, vol. 1 of *EP Study Commentary* (Faverdale North, Darlington, England, Webster, N.Y.: Evangelical Press ; Evangelical Press USA, 2000) pg 160.

Isaiah before the discouraging message of verses 9-13<sup>33</sup>, therefore it served as a restatement of his original call. Mackay, however, believes that the narrative is the original call of Isaiah and is placed after the preceding prophecies in an effort to re-center the reader before the consequences of the previous prophecies are explained<sup>34</sup>. Bartelt argues that the narrative is in fact Isaiah's inaugural call and is placed after the preceding prophecies in an effort to introduce hope into Isaiah's prophecies through recounting his cleansing<sup>35</sup>. This argument is supported by the inclusion of hope at the end of Isaiah's charge in verses 9-13. This inclusion of hope is not present in the prophecies of the preceding chapters and represents a shift that continues throughout the rest of the book. Thankfully, the status of this narrative as an inaugural call or a restatement of a call does not have much bearing on the theological implications of Isaiah's message in verses 9-13.

What is more important than the status of Isaiah's call in chapter 6 as an inaugural call or a restatement is the spiritual context of the Israelite population when Isaiah is given this charge. As mentioned previously, the charge given to Isaiah in this passage was given in the year King Uzziah died. At this point in time, Judah was extremely prosperous financially, agriculturally, and militarily<sup>36</sup>. This worldly decadence led to a spiritual deadness in the population of Judah; a population that was spiritually fat from their indulgence. This indulgence and spiritual deadness is de-cried in the previous prophecies of Isaiah in chapters 1-5 and finds an extremely visible example in Isaiah's encounter with Ahaz in chapter 7. The result of all this spiritual deadness was Judah breaking their covenant with The Lord, leading

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1953) pgs 144-145.

<sup>34</sup> Mackay, *Isaiah*, vol. 1 pgs 158-159.

<sup>35</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pgs 421-422.

<sup>36</sup> Mackay, *Isaiah*, vol. 1 pgs 158-159.

to required judgement from The Lord. The need for judgement led to the message given to Isaiah and is the focus of the next section.

### **The Message of Judgement in Isaiah 6:9-12**

The message of judgement contained in verses 9-12 of Isaiah 6 have a history of being difficult to swallow. These verses do not present the picture of an all-loving God so often evoked by modern American Christianity; in fact, many modern American Christians would probably find this presentation of God offensive. Additionally, this passage seems to contradict the usual prophetic call to repentance<sup>37</sup>. In fact, verse 9 almost seems as if Isaiah is instructing the people of Judah to not understand or know his message. This is compounded in verse 10 as God explicitly tells Isaiah to “make hard the heart of this people and make their ears grow heavy and make sealed their eyes”. The seeming command in verse 9 for the people to not understand is revealed to be the express wish of God as he commands Isaiah to ensure the people do not understand his message. If this is not enough to convince the audience that God does not desire for these people to return to him, the end of verse 10 confirms it. God here clearly states that Isaiah is needs to do these things because otherwise the people would turn back and be healed.

This is a difficult teaching – it seems that God is actively desiring for the stubbornness, and therefore destruction, of his covenant people. How is this consistent with the character of God as one who has mercy on his covenant people? The answer lies in the spiritual context discussed previously. This message was given to Isaiah after a period of economic prosperity and spiritual decline. The people of Judah had continually turned away from the Lord prior to this message; in this manner Judah is similar to Pharaoh; a man who

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<sup>37</sup> Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 1st ed., The Christian Standard Commentary Ser (Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: B&H Publishing Group, 2022) pg 214.

was recalcitrant on his own before God hardened his heart<sup>38</sup>. The people of Judah were given plenty of time to repent from their sin. Despite this mercy, they continued to reject the Lord and choose their own paths. Therefore, God gave them over to the dullness of their hearts in judgement and for their lack of repentance he commanded their hearts to be hardened further. Calvin discusses this in his commentary on Isaiah and compares the people of Judah to a people whose eyes are blinded by a bright light – it is not the light's fault that the people are blinded – instead it is the weakness of their eyes<sup>39</sup>.

After this message from the Lord, Isaiah calls out in grief “How long my Lord?” While it is not explicit in the original Hebrew, one can only imagine the pain and grief Isaiah experienced upon receiving this message. Isaiah’s question here may indicate that he is hoping the state described in verses 9 and 10 is only a stage in his ministry that will lead to true repentance on the part of Judah<sup>40</sup>. Unfortunately for Isaiah, verses 11 and 12 dispel this notion. These verses describe a desolation unknown in Judah at that time but one that would have been very familiar to people familiar with the covenant curses of Deuteronomy. God states that the hearts of the people will be hardened until Judah is a land whose cities and houses are completely uninhabited because the people have been removed. This description echoes what God said would happen because of covenant betrayal in Deuteronomy 28:63b-64<sup>41</sup>: “and you will be torn from the land where you are entering to possess it. Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have

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<sup>38</sup> J. Gordon McConville, *Isaiah*, 1st ed., Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Prophetic Bks (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023) pg 110.

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1 of *Calvin’s Commentaries 7* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981) pg 217.

<sup>40</sup> Bartelt, *Isaiah 1-12* pg 447.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Isaiah 1-39* pg 216.

not known" (NASB 1995). This section of the call concludes in destruction and leaves a question – how will the Lord stay faithful to his covenant with David throughout this destruction? The answer is found in verse 13.

### **The Seed of Hope in Verse 13**

Verse 13 is the most complicated verse of this entire chapter in terms of the original Hebrew, with every translation decision having an impact on the meaning of the verse. Since the translation of this verse has already been justified, this section will walk through the verse phrase by phrase explaining its meaning according to the given translation. After this exposition, the importance of the verse will be discussed. Verse 13 begins with the words "And yet." The importance of the verse starting with this phrase is that it sets the following section in opposition to the previous message of destruction. All the previous communication from the Lord up to this point focused on the judgement and destruction of Judah. By beginning with this phrase, the Lord clearly states that the following words will be different from the message of punishing Judah for their disobedience. The Lord then says, "in it a tenth *will remain* and it will return" In these words, God is explaining that despite his judgement, a tenth of Israel will remain in the land<sup>42</sup>. This tenth is likely not a literal tenth, rather it is meant to represent a faithful remnant left over from the destruction of the land. There is also debate as to what destruction verses 11 and 12 reference. It seems evident, however, that the most likely candidate is the exile of 586 B.C.; the description of the land after its destruction lines up very closely with the description of the exile in Deuteronomy. More than this, the remnant will also return to the Lord. This reinforces the identity of the tenth as the exiles who returned to the land.

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<sup>42</sup> Calvin offers a different viewpoint in his commentary, not present in more modern volumes; he states that the 10<sup>th</sup> discussed here could refer to the 10 kings between Uzziah and the exile. Calvin, pg 223

The next section of the verse states “And it (the land) will be, by burning, like a terebinth and like an oak that in felling have a stump in them”. This phrase is longer than the previous ones, however in the Hebrew it is one connected thought, therefore it will be treated all at once. Given the large difference in translation between this paper and most modern English bible translations for verse 13, there are significant differences in meaning as well. This section compares the state of the land after its destruction in verses 11 and 12 to the state of the two most plentiful trees in the area after they have been felled<sup>43</sup>. The phrase “by burning” is simply referencing how the land entered the state where it is similar to felled trees<sup>44</sup>; “by burning” is therefore a reference to the destruction of verses 11 and 12. After this, the Lord describes that the land will be similar to a terebinth and an oak that, when felled, remain as a stump. This phrase, taken with the phrase “by burning”, means that the land will be left as a stump because of the desolation it experienced, just like a tree that is felled. This leaves a question: since a land cannot physically have a stump, what will the stump of the land be? This is answered in the final phrase of the verse. The final phrase of the verse is simple in meaning: “a holy seed is its (the land’s) stump.” Here the question of how the land will have a stump is answered. The metaphorical stump of the land is the faithful remnant. This finds support in Ezra 9:2 where the phrase is used to describe the returnees from the exile<sup>45</sup>. This is the only other time the phrase שְׁמִינִית is used, and it explicitly refers to Israelites who returned from the exile. “The Holy Seed” serves to cap off verse 13 with a message of hope – no matter the destruction enforced on the land, the Lord will be faithful to preserve a remnant of his people in order to preserve his covenant with David.

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<sup>43</sup> Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, pg 154.

<sup>44</sup> Multiple commentators instead take a different approach to the phrase, understanding, “by burning”, to be a reference to another destruction experienced by the remnant. See Smith, pg 217; Mackay, pg 178; Alexander, pgs 154-155; Bartelt, pg 448;

<sup>45</sup> McConville, *Isaiah (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament* pg 112.

## The Coexistence of God's Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness

Isaiah chapter 6 contains a wide breadth of possible sermon topics. The message that will be discussed here is the coexistence of God's justice, mercy, and faithfulness. This passage exhibits three aspects of God's character throughout verses 9-13 that conveniently provide three sermon points; each of these will be discussed below.

First, it is evident from the passage that God is just and enacts judgement. This is seen clearly in verses 9-12. As mentioned earlier, the first instance of justice seen is in verses 9 and 10. In these verses God describes how the hearts, eyes, and ears of the people will be dulled by listening to the word of Isaiah. While this seems as if God is preventing his people from repenting, and therefore being unjust, he is actually giving the people of Israel over to their desires. In a sermon, it would be very beneficial to reference two things. First, the kings previous to Uzziah as examples of the spiritual decline seen in Israel; second, the example of Pharaoh previously mentioned as an example of God hardening hearts in response to persistent disobedience in the face of calls to repentance. Another point of reasoning that would be useful is a reference to the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28 as justifying God's punishment of the Israelites for their disobedience. After referencing these examples, it would be beneficial to reference the purpose of parables in the New Testament as another example of the Word of God actively preventing the understanding of the non-elect.

After discussing God's justice, the passage moves naturally to an exhibition of God's mercy in the beginning of verse 13, namely the phrase "and yet in it a tenth *will remain* and it will return." This phrase exhibits so clearly the mercy of God that very little exposition is required on the part of the preacher. They should emphasize that this mercy was undeserved by pointing back to examples of disobedience such as the kings previously mentioned and the

disobedience of Israel in the wilderness. Additionally, the one preaching should reference that Israel deserved to be exiled as soon as they failed to fully occupy the promised land. The fact that God waited so long to enact the covenant consequences the Israelites deserved shows his great mercy towards his people. This has clear implications for believers, as without Christ all are deserving of judgement and without God's mercy every person would deserve condemnation. God's mercy is then shown to be present in both the Old Testament and the New Testament in his mercy on Israel in delaying their exile and judgement and on sending Christ to die for the sins of his elect.

The third and final point in a sermon based on Isaiah 6:9-13 is God's covenant faithfulness. This point explains why God shows his mercy to his people despite their disobedience and can be pulled from the phrase "and it will return." This phrase explains that after the destruction of the land, the faithful tenth will not only remain on earth, but it will return to the land. This is a fulfillment of the covenant promise in Deuteronomy 30:3-5:

"then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. 'If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back.' 'The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers'"

This passage serves as evidence that God's mercy in returning the Israelites to the land is rooted in his faithfulness to the covenant he made with not just David, but Israel as a whole. A point of application for this is how God's covenant faithfulness applies not just to the

ancient Israelites, but to the church as God's people. Believers can take refuge in the fact that God's promises to the Israelites apply to the church as well.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, The narrative of Isaiah's call holds a great amount of theological richness. It exhibits the holiness of God, in addition to his justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The message of destruction and devastation in response to covenant disobedience ends with hope in God's preservation of a faithful remnant that will seek after him and obey his covenant. The implications for Christians in the post-resurrection world bring great comfort as God's mercy has been shown in Christ and therefore there is great trust in his faithfulness going forward. Sermons on this passage have a wealth of themes to pull from, with a prime example being the coexistence of God's justice, mercy, and faithfulness as he deals with his covenant people.

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