

Growing in Times of Crisis

Isaiah 6:1-13

The NIV is used unless otherwise stated.

Chapter 6 in the book of Isaiah narrates a remarkable experience that changed the prophet's life. This life-changing encounter with God took place "in the year that King Uzziah died" (6:1). This detail helps us date Isaiah's experience to the year 740 BC, but more than that, it helps us understand the context of Isaiah's extraordinary experience. What is the significance of King Uzziah's death?

The life of king Uzziah is recorded in 2 Chronicles 26. He "was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for fifty-two years... He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD... He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (26:4-5). The whole nation enjoyed the benefits of his success, experiencing peace, world status and material prosperity. He was particularly admired because of his military might: "Uzziah had a well-trained army... In Jerusalem he made machines designed by skilful men for use on the towers and on the corner defences to shoot arrows and hurl large stones. His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped..." (26:11-15).

Try to imagine the effect of these 52 years of peace, stability and prosperity. No-one in Judah under the age of 55 knew what life could be like without king Uzziah. But these years of normality came to an end. King Uzziah sinned, was afflicted with leprosy, and then died. We can nearly feel the tension in the air: What will happen now? Who will lead the nation? Will enemies invade? It was a year of national crisis. And in this time of crisis, "in the year that king Uzziah died," the Lord God chose to call, to cleanse and to commission prophet Isaiah. We also face times of crisis. It can be a family crisis dealing with the consequences of ill-health, divorce or death. There can be national or global crisis that affect us personally, related to terrorism, unemployment or unstable financial markets. We may experience crisis in faith, as we wrestle with new doubts, as we reflect on unanswered prayer or as we experience some local church conflict. A time of relative calm has come to an end, and now the future looks so uncertain. God's dealings with Isaiah teach us that He

can use those painful and difficult seasons. In God's hand, times of crisis provide an opportunity for personal growth.

1. In times of crisis, seek the Lord

When crisis comes, some people paralyse, either by fear or shock. Others, however, become over-active, seeking a quick solution as they run from one side to another. What does Isaiah do? He could have joined a delegation to visit neighbouring countries to sign peace agreements. He could have entered into discussions with the powerful military men. He could have tried setting up his own "religious" political party. In this opening verse, we do not find Isaiah in the palace neither in the market place, but in the temple. In times of crisis he seeks the Lord.

The Lord is happy to see him there and rewards him with an important vision. It is not a vision of a peaceful millennial future. It is not a vision about the destruction of enemies. No! God knew exactly what Isaiah needed, a vision of God Himself: "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple (6:1). The Lord was in no panic. The crisis had not taken Him by surprise. He was not running from one side to another. The Lord was calm. He was seated. Isaiah needed to notice that. And so do we. The Lord was seated on a throne, which speaks of His authority. It was a high and exalted throne. As Isaiah took in what he saw, his spirit found rest. For Judah the crisis opened the door to an uncertain future. But for Isaiah, this vision of God filled him with calm confidence. Knowing that the future was in God's hands, he could later write "This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?" (Is. 14:26-27). If we are to remain calm in times of crisis and confident about the future, we also need a fresh and realistic vision of God.

2. In times of crisis, look at yourself

As Isaiah gazed at the Lord, he saw 2 seraphs flying above His throne. He heard them call to one another "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (6:3). To complement the awe-inspiring experience, "the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke" (6:4). God has many wonderful attributes. He is love. He is faithful. He is almighty. But the only attribute that is repeated 3 times is this one: He is holy. The repetition is used for emphasis. Isaiah understood the message. His eyes turned from the Lord to himself. The contrast was painfully obvious. "Woe to me!" cried Isaiah, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips..." (6:5). A crisis provides us with an opportunity to draw near to the Lord. And as we do so, we become painfully aware of our own inadequacy.

Before the crisis, we happily say that our future is in the Lord's hands. But when the crisis hits, when our savings are stolen, when our job is lost, when our health breaks... our future no longer feels safe. Perhaps it is easier to trust the Lord when we feel confident, secure and in control. The crisis breaks our cosmetic security. The Lord considered it important that Isaiah should feel his own smallness, so He shows him His greatness. The Lord considered it important that Isaiah should feel his own

sinfulness, so He shows him His holiness. Your crisis is also an invitation to draw close to the Lord and then take a realistic view of yourself. In the Lord's hands, a crisis is a tool to awaken us from comfortable religious routine, to expose lies in the way we think, to help us see our ungodly priorities. Rather than trying to blame others for their involvement in your crisis, in God's presence look at yourself. Maybe there is something you need to correct. Maybe you also have "unclean lips!"

3. In times of crisis, try listening

"Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'" (6:6-7). This was a symbolic action. The altar probably represents the work of Christ, since forgiveness and cleansing are normally associated with the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus: "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people" (Heb. 9:28). Can you imagine the effect of a burning coal touching your sensitive lips? I am sure Isaiah never forgot that painful moment. The scars and memories ensured that he would never forget his past reality: unclean lips. We also need reminding where we came from. Without the memories of our own inadequacy and His sufficiency, we shall lack grace in our dealings with others. The Lord wanted to use Isaiah's lips, so He first burnt them.

Isaiah is now clean and attentive in the presence of the Lord. He is now ready to listen. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'" (6:8). It is so easy to have our own ideas, our own plans, our own opinions, our own solutions. And when our mind is busy with our own ideas, plans, opinions and solutions, it is so difficult to listen to the Lord. His quiet voice is drowned in our internal chaos. But if we are to benefit from the crisis, if we are to grow through it, we must hand over our initiatives to the Lord and try to listen to His voice. Later Isaiah applied this principle to the whole nation: "Woe to the obstinate children... who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin... Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! ... Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Is. 30:1,18-21). The Lord may choose to speak through the advice of others, through His Word, through circumstances, through a dream... the Sovereign Lord will choose the vehicle. Our part, like that of Isaiah and Samuel, is to be in a condition to hear: "Speak LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:9).

4. In times of crisis, be open to change

When Isaiah answered the Lord "Here am I. Send me!" (6:8), I wonder what task Isaiah expected the Lord to give him. Did he think the Lord would send him to anoint a new king, like Samuel did to David nearly 300 years before? Did he play with the possibility that the Lord would appoint him as the next king? Did he imagine the Lord would use him, like He used Moses, to lead the people of God out of the crisis into some new land? The Lord did not ask Isaiah "What do you fancy doing?" Rather He

said “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving...’” (6:9). The Lord knew what needed doing. We may also have our preferred options, but when we say to the Lord “I am yours. Here I am. Use me,” we must be open to His answer. Before the crisis, friendships, family, church, studies, work, health and finances were developing in a “satisfactory” manner. There was no need for any mayor change. You considered that perhaps only minor adjustments were necessary. Take note that a time of crisis may also be the time for change. The life of Isaiah changed. It was never the same again.

It is important to notice that it was not the crisis itself that changed Isaiah. The crisis provides us with an opportunity to stop the normal, to move closer to the Lord, to clean up, to listen. And as we do these things, we may sense the Lord calling us to change. He may direct us to continue faithfully with our labours. Or like Archippus, we have confused priorities and we are now being called to “complete the work you have received in the Lord” (Col. 4:17). But the Lord may also be opening a window to show us a new direction, a new ministry, a new calling. Isaiah was given a difficult prophetic ministry. The people he was to speak to were stubborn. If he had his eyes on “success” and visible results, he would not last long. Crises and difficulties in themselves should not determine when we stop. When commissioned, Isaiah asked “For how long, O Lord?” And the Lord answered, “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant... until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken” (6:11-12). Every activity under the sun is temporal. This includes Christian activities such as Christian schools, hospitals, orphanages, mission organizations, music bands, magazines, even local churches. Like Isaiah we should also ask “For how long, O Lord?” It is for the Lord to determine starting and ending times. To continue when He says stop is not faithfulness. It is disobedience. To stop when He says go, is also disobedience. A crisis may suggest a change, but don’t start, stop or change until you feel the Lord is speaking.

Conclusion

Perhaps life has taken a strange and difficult turn for you recently. Sometimes you wonder why the Lord is using such a painful and blunt tool. The Lord uses times of internal unrest to encourage us to get closer to Him, to clean us, to speak to our heart. See your crisis as an opportunity to grow. The Lord is still seated on His throne, high and exalted. He remains in control. Choose to draw nearer to Him, choose to clean up, choose to listen to His voice, choose to grow through this crisis. Soon, as a testimony, you will be able to sing with many others: “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD for ever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal” (Is. 26:3,4).

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