

Isaiah 6

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[0 : 00] I want us this evening to turn to the scriptures of the Old Testament which we read together in Isaiah 6.

This morning we looked together at the importance of the ministry of encouragement. And we looked together at that in a sense through a character study of Barnabas as Luke reveals him to us in the Acts of the Apostles.

A man who enters the stage of the Christian church very quietly and quite unassuming in his arrival. And yet in the short time that Luke touches upon his life in his record of the Acts of the Apostles, we're given four wonderful cameos of his life.

[1 : 10] And how through that life he exercised what we considered this morning the ministry of encouragement.

What I want us to do this evening is perhaps come again together not so much to look at encouragement, but to look at the reality of discouragement.

And how in the Word of God we find, as it were, the prescription to overcome it. And particularly that prescription as it's found in the call and the commission of Isaiah.

When we talk about discouragement, most of us in one way or another can relate to it. Because in the outworking of all our lives, inevitably, there will come periods, moments in our existences when our spirits will be tested and will flag, and even in the life of each of us as God's people, as Christians, we will grow weary.

And that reality of discouragement is something we must constantly work against. We must be on our guard against it, because it is probably the most debilitating experience in the world.

[2 : 48] We must work guard against it supremely in our Christian experiences, in our ministries, and in our work as God's people.

However that work is carried out, whether it's in the pulpit, in a congregational context, teaching the children, running the creche, door duty, whatever it is, we must work against and guard against and strive to overcome the temptation to grow discouraged in the work of God's kingdom.

The consequences of discouragement are ever apparent. And we can pick that up even by looking at the opposites as we find some of these in the experience of Isaiah.

The consequences of discouragement, and those of us who have known it, can witness to its paralysis and to its misery.

Those of us who have known it will connect with the realities that we're going to look at this evening. Because I think it can affect us by way of consequence in three ways.

[4 : 11] In respect to our Christian living and service, it can debilitate. If you turn with me to Isaiah 6, we are given insight here into the call of this great man.

In verse 8, we are told that Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? And the instinctive reply from this man of God in the light of what he has heard and what he has observed is, Here am I.

Send me. If we're a discouraged people, if we're discouraged as individuals, discouraged collectively as a congregation, that is not the spirit that any of us will adopt.

We'll not volunteer as instinctively Isaiah did. We'll not volunteer because if we're discouraged and the reality of discouragement is all around us, we will say to ourselves, as we hear perhaps the call of God to serve, we will respond by saying, What's the use?

[5 : 38] And the harsh reality of this experience in respect to service is the fallout that we have known over the years of Christian ministry.

that spirit that ultimately comes to bear its toll on lives and on spirits, that responds to the call goal with that refrain, A what with?

With that refrain, with a message that's what? With a message that is so unpalatable, a message that's so unpopular, a message that no longer seems relevant and the reality is that in respect to service, when discouragement overtakes it, that becomes the experience.

The Apostle Paul, as we read in 2 Corinthians 4, picks up this danger in respect to Christian service. And as he touches upon it, Paul is clearly looking at his own life and as a human being, as a man, he was a subject to the temptation of discouragement as the rest of us.

And as he's looking at the reality of his life, the reality of a life that has been called apart to be a light to the Gentile nations, to be one who will go with a gospel that will bring liberation to a people in darkness.

[7 : 10] Paul, as no one else is aware, is clued in to all the temptations and the difficulties and the battles that are around him.

And yet, as he's thinking about it all, he's saying, having this message, this ministry, we do not lose heart. Because you remember in the second chapter of Corinthians, or Corinthians 4, 2 Corinthians 4, Paul was acutely aware of what could happen if discouragement overtook.

He was aware of the fact that he did not adopt, he did not adopt, as he puts it, secret and shameful ways, using deception and distorting the Word of God.

Which is always an inevitable or potential consequence of being overcome by discouragement. But it's not just in respect to our service that it has consequence.

It has consequence we notice also in our personal lives. because discouraged people inevitably feel bad.

[8 : 35] Don't feel good about themselves. They inevitably come to the place where they feel trapped in a world of darkness that seems to have no light and there seems to be no escape from it.

And in the light of that are exposed to several dangers. And again, this evening, if we've known it in our own lives, we can empathize with these dangers.

The danger, for example, of bitterness. Outwardly, we carry on. Outwardly, we historically face the day and we face the challenges of the day as God's people, whether in ministry or in our office or in our home.

We historically face the experience of a new day and its challenges. But inside, inside, there is that growing spirit of bitterness.

That bitterness that is generating a resentment of God, a resentment of the providences of God, a resentment of the people of God.

[9 : 48] And the problem develops as that bitterness envelops our lives, is that we no longer seem to adorn the glorious doctrines of grace and the graciousness that should mark us as God's people.

I quoted this morning that saying of Henry Drummond, that comment that he made of there being more prodigals outside the church because of the unlovely characters of those who are inside it.

And if our experience is an experience of ongoing discouragement and bitterness enters into us personally, we become unlovely people.

It's so often transparent that there is nothing of the beauty, for example, that was in Barnabas. That when Luke is trying to encapsulate what marked this man out, he can simply say he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit.

Or of Stephen, where even in the midst of his closing moments of life, it's born testimony of his disposition that he was a man of grace and of power.

[11 : 16] But a second consequence to our lives personally is the reality perhaps of depression. Some of us do snap.

Some of us in the midst of our vulnerability break. We burn out and as a consequence that burnout leads to clinical depression and the need for medical help.

And you say surely that's a bit extreme. Surely there is no discouragement in the life of the Christian or the life of the Christian church that should bring any of us to the place where we need medical help because we're so low.

I don't think that is extreme to say. We can go back into the Word of God and we can go back for example to the life of Elijah in 1 Kings 19.

and the tone of Elijah in chapter 19 of 1 Kings is the tone of a man who is not only discouraged but a man who is utterly depressed.

[12 : 23] Who's crying out to God look I've had enough. He is so troubled in his spirit. He is so morbid in his outlook. He becomes suicidal in his thinking.

A third consequence at a personal level is a moral consequence and that is the consequence of adultery and other forms or other kinds of sin.

But it happens and the church can bear witness to it happening up and down the land and to the ends of the earth wherever the church is.

That where a discouraged people or person has so become wrapped up in this constant you would say strain of discouragement.

It has led to all forms of moral bankruptcy. A number of years ago I remember reading a book by John Benton that highlighted this experience in a friend of his who was in pastoral ministry.

[13 : 33] And his statement read something like this. I was discouraged and feeling worthless. No one at church encouraged me.

My wife gave me little comfort and then along came Angela and I just thought why not? There is no joy anywhere else. And it has been a reality in the lives of God's people from time to time.

this outworking we might say at a personal level of discouragement bringing us to the place of moral bankruptcy. And I think a fourth danger or consequence is that of hypocrisy.

We react to discouragement by putting on this brave face to the world and to the community of God's people that we meet with day in and day out week in and week out.

We're one thing in church but we're a completely different commodity at all. And it is indeed something that is real in all of us when we succumb perhaps to the dangers of discouragement.

[14 : 53] So there's this consequence to our Christian service. Instead of being responsive to the call of God and to the privileges and duties that are ours of the people of God like Isaiah was, here am I.

No, we're shrinking back. There are these personal consequences. These consequences of the danger of bitterness, the danger of depression, the danger of moral bankruptcy, the danger of hypocrisy.

But there's also at a collective level a consequence. And perhaps in the Christian Church of Scotland this evening we're more aware of this than we've ever been or we've been for a long time.

Because there are many, many things that discourage the church in Scotland this evening. Many things that we can look at that brings discouragement to our collective spirits.

And when a church succumbs to that temptation to be discouraged, that temptation in the light of all the problems that are around, to see, as it were, the cup half empty instead of the cup half full, the danger collectively is that we grow disunited, discontent, and ultimately discouraged.

[16 : 13] Our church has become very unhappy places. I hope that's not the experience here in Aberdeen. But it is a danger that can be experienced in congregations.

And I think that's again why in the Word of God there is this constant exhortation to love one another and to encourage one another. And so, let's look almost briefly, but yet look at what we're told here in Isaiah 6.

Almost by way of antidote to these potential consequences to discouragement. Because Isaiah here unfolds for us some wonderful prescriptions.

First of all, for Isaiah at the moment of his call to Christian service. he is given a vision of the holiness of God.

God's holiness is the theme of the book of Isaiah. But Isaiah is given personally insight into it.

[17 : 30] Because in verse 1 we're told in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, he says, seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him were seraphs each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet and with two they were flying and they were calling to one another holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty.

The whole air is full of his glory. there is a sense in which that magnificent vision of Isaiah is not at all exhaustive.

These angels don't describe as it were holy the otherness of the God that is revealed here. But we are privy here through what is accounted to appreciate that this holiness of God as Isaiah saw it is a reminder to us of the otherness of that God.

That he is that self-existent being. That self-sufficient being. That God as the scriptures describe as being from everlasting to everlasting God.

[18 : 56] He is that God who is not like you and like me. He is that God who is not created we are. He is that God who is not dependent we are.

He is utterly self contained. And that vision of the holiness of God holy holy holy is the Lord almighty was their refrain.

That vision transformed Isaiah's life. And what I want us to appreciate from that vision this evening is that that God of Isaiah's is your God and my God is this evening.

And I wish we would bear that in mind on the days and in the weeks and in the periods of our lives when we allow the reality of discouragement grip us paralyze us debilitate us.

Because that God is the God that we serve. Our work may look insignificant. Our life as we look back it may seem to have achieved nothing for God at all.

[20 : 08] And the work of the church even in Scotland this evening we might say is a work that seems to be working against the tide that is fast overcoming it. But my friends remember this.

Despite the perception of things that God of Isaiah is still the God who is in control. And it is that God who we have audience with.

The one who is altogether holy. And I think if more and more we reflected on that fear and discouragement would only fly away in the light of it.

But it's not just the holiness of God that Isaiah saw. He saw the grace of God at work too. If you go down to verses 6 to 7 or you begin at verse 5 woe to me.

Remember he has just seen this vision of the otherness of the God who is the creator of all things. He doubtless had the hair on the back of his neck stand on end by what he has just seen.

[21 : 30] This God who is so awesome and high and lifted up. And now he looks at himself. What does he feel? What does he send woe is me he says.

I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among the people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty. He is so intimidated overcome by his sinfulness by his unrighteousness by his ugliness all he can say is woe woe is me.

Sometimes I think we have lost sight of the consciousness of what sin is in our lives as Christians because we have lost sight of the otherness and the holiness of God that so seldom do I find myself saying woe woe is me that Isaiah said that sensitive Christians serious Christians so often feel like Isaiah felt and they feel it to the point where like Isaiah did they want they want almost to run away from God they want to be like or they want to say like Peter said to Jesus I am a sinful man depart from me you remember what does Isaiah experience he experiences the grace of God one of the seraphs in verse 6 flew to me with a live coal in his hand which he 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 sins atoned for the coal that's taken from the altar symbolizing the provision of sacrifice reminding

Isaiah that despite what he felt he was as it were cleansed and made fit for God nothing to do with himself but all the result of the free grace of God and that goes for you and for me this evening how many of us in the grip of discouragement in the grip of it in respect to our service our personal lives our collective experience shrink back shrink back and succumb to the awfulness of discouragement because we've lost sight of the wonder not just of the God that is our God but of the grace that is God's grace all too often too many of us are like that the late Dr.

Martin Lloyd Jones said this the devil says look at your record when did you hear him whispering that to you recently look at your record there's only one conclusion to draw you've never been a Christian at all and I think lots of us as Christian people have heard these words whispered in our ears the late Dr.

[24 : 52] Martin Lloyd Jones went on to say this answer him by telling him that what makes a Christian is not what he finds in himself good or bad it is the blood and the righteousness of Jesus that's what Isaiah experienced here he experienced as that serafim comes with the coal and as it were touches his mouth he experiences the grace of God your guilt is taken away your sins atone for the third thing that he captures which again is prescriptive to dealing with discouragement is the call of God he hears this call the call of a transcendent enthralling gracious God in verse 8 I heard the voice of the Lord saying whom shall I send and who will go for us and all of a sudden

Isaiah forgets himself he forgets himself and his instinctive response to the call of God is here am I send me remember what's going on here there is this process of events this vision of the glory and the holiness of God there is this appreciation of the grace of God and there is this instinctive rising within the heart of this man that this is a privilege to serve this God and irrespective of the demands and irrespective of the pressures here here here am I he says send me again isn't that spirit something that's captured in the words of the hymn see from its head as hands and feet love and

sorrow flow mingle down did e'er such love and sorrow meet or thorns compose so rich a crown as the hymn writer reflects on the sufferings of

Jesus on the work of God's love in his son on the cross what does that result in as he describes it it results in them demanding his life his soul his all and so it is for you and me we're so often preoccupied with ourselves aren't we with our ministries with our church with our feelings with our reputations with our securities with me me me and all the time we should instead be filled with a vision and with a sight of the great God who is calling us to serve him in this world but then fourthly you notice this prescription of the glory of God as he saw it it was the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord seated on a throne high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple Isaiah is privy to what very few have been privy to he sees into the reality of heaven itself he sees and he tastes of that perfect world beyond pain and beyond the struggle of the present he sees the glory of God those that have appreciated the wonder and the glory the awesomeness of God are given this prescription automatic prescription to discouragement that's why we read in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians this evening because Paul is someone who as well saw into that glorious world and to that glory that surrounds our God and what did Paul say when he wrote to the Romans he said I consider that our present suffering are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us when he's writing to the

Corinthians much the same note is struck having this ministry this ministry given to us from a holy God this ministry given to us the result of the grace of God and the call of God is a ministry that as having it we do not lose heart so outwardly we're wasting away he said yet inwardly we're being renewed day by day for our light and our momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all there's a sentence in which for Paul and for Isaiah there is this resistance to grow discouraged and remember in the light of the call that was Isaiah's Isaiah's call was to a ministry that was going to be anything but easy his call was a call to minister to a people that he was going to see little if any success among go and tell this people verse 9 be ever hearing and never understanding seeing but never perceiving make the hearts of this people callous make their ears dull close their eyes otherwise they might see with their eyes hear with their ears understand with their hearts and turn and be healed and such is the weight of that call such is the burden that is upon

[30 : 37] Isaiah he says for how long do you want me to go Lord until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant until the houses are left deserted fields ruined and ravaged what a call what a ministry but you see Isaiah because of this vision that he had the grace that had touched his life the reality of the glory of the God that he sees has Isaiah like Paul looking to the day when he will hear the well done my good and faithful servant and it should be the same with you and me but something else we can say kept Isaiah up or abreast of the experience of discouragement we can say this in the light perhaps of what we read here in chapter 6 he not only saw the holiness of

God experienced the grace of God heard the call of God saw the glory of God but Isaiah also saw the Son of God it's not easy perhaps to appreciate that in the context of what's before us in chapter 6 but we only need to go through the chapters of Isaiah 2 53 because Isaiah clearly did see the Son of God the one who was to come into the world as that suffering servant that one who would act wisely who would be lifted up and highly exalted Isaiah saw we might say the Lord Jesus Christ and as Isaiah saw him he saw him not as one who would ultimately be defeated as one who would ultimately be a waste of time serving he saw him as one who indeed would take up out infirmities carry out sorrows who would be stricken by

God and afflicted but yet through whom we would find healing by his wounds we are healed he would say he would justify many and you see Isaiah captured that he would indeed be pierced for our transgressions but what Isaiah was capturing there in this outworking of this call to minister to a people that would be an obstinate and discouraging people to him Isaiah is finding reason to keep on going and perhaps we could bring it down to this perspective on it that he's finding reason to keep going now as he sees the Son of God in the midst of everything because he has been reminded as he sees him of the amazing love that God has for his people that

God so loved the world that he gave this son to that world isn't it later put in these terms greater love has no man than this that one would lay down his life for his friends you are my friends Jesus said isn't that incredibly uplifting encouraging words not just from a man but from the son of God himself to his people to you and to me in the outworking of our ministries and our service that's why rather than in the days of discouragement and the experience of discouragement complain and

bemoan the providences of God and the strange ways of God we should hear the voice of scripture that exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord always and finally there is something else that Isaiah saw that was prescriptive to discouragement he saw

God's sovereignty in the year that king Isaiah died I saw the Lord where seated on a throne Isaiah is dead Isaiah as a man faced what all men would face the reality that it is appointed unto men once to die that's why thrones come and thrones go humanly speaking but there's one on the throne Isaiah sees whose throne is from everlasting and to everlasting he sees one on the throne who will overcome and he sees that one on the throne so visibly does he see him that in verse 5 he puts it this way

[36 : 06] I'm a man of unclean lips yes I live among a people of unclean lips that's undoubtedly true but he says my eyes have seen the king the lord of hosts you can almost feel the strength surge in Isaiah at that point the present will be hard the experiences will be tough the reality will test Isaiah to the hilt but Isaiah knows that the one who has called him is a god who is and who is alive and the rewarder of all that diligently seek him Isaiah knows that that god is a god that's gracious in his dealings with those that turn to him and he's a god that will fulfill his promises as well and how uplifting and moving is that vision of god's sovereignty to Isaiah it will be the same for you and me and it should be the same for you and me as we so often face the difficulties of the present sure they're tough sure at times they test us sure they are discouraging but surely the present darkness will make the lord the sovereign lord that Isaiah saw that is our lord even more glorious as he revives his church and more importantly as he comes again him captures perhaps here the spirit of what

Isaiah is experiencing as he sees the sovereignty of god this lord seated on the throne when it addresses the spirit in this phrase earth has no hurts that heaven cannot cure nothing that you can experience that might discourage you here in Aberdeen nothing is beyond the cure and the remedy and the help of a god as Isaiah as god is as our god is this evening are you discouraged here don't be allow the god of Isaiah and the experiences of Isaiah be yours and allow them keep you up keep you focused keep you looking unto Jesus who never fails his people who keeps his promises amen