

**Articles and Sermons :: 'Woe!' 'Lo!' 'Go!' -sparks**

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'Woe!' 'Lo!' 'Go!'

by T. Austin Sparks

Reading: Isaiah 6:1-5; John 12:41; Isaiah 6:6-14.

"These things said Isaiah, because he saw his glory; and he spake of him."

John was referring to the Lord Jesus - Jehovah of Hosts!

We have seen that what took place at the time of Isaiah's vision was related to the entirely new order of things into which WE have come. It was the end of an earth-centred system, the end of the earthly seat of Divine government and priesthood; and the introduction of the heavenly and the true, the abiding, the eternal. It was not only a vision of the pre-incarnate glory of the Lord Jesus, but it was a prophetic forecast of the new order, the new economy - what we call the new dispensation. He, our Lord, would be exalted far above all rule and authority: the seat and centre of government would be - as it now is - in Heaven with Him; the priesthood is continued by Him; the house is now a heavenly house. That came in, in its beginnings, with this vision.

We have spoken of the tremendous things that happened in that eighth century before Christ. Now WE are in the time of that vision's real fulfilment. That vision is, or should be, the vision of the Church, the people of God, now; and in the light of that vision the Church ought to be fulfilling its ministry, as did Isaiah. Because Isaiah, as we have pointed out and stressed, is not just a historic figure or a representative of a certain period in this world's history: he is a representation and embodiment of a permanent, Divine function, in relation to bringing the people of God to God's thought and fullness in Christ. And that function is as much here now as it was in the days of Isaiah: the function of the prophetic ministry remains. There may not be a people whom we today call 'prophets', in the Old Testament sense, but the function of the Holy Spirit is being carried on in this dispensation: the function that seeks all the time to keep in view God's full end and purpose before the people of God, and to bring them into that purpose.

If we are a part of the Lord's people, then these two things apply to us: first, the vision of the exalted Lord; and second, the ministry that issues therefrom. These two things belong to US. Whether we are in the good of them or not may be another matter. But that is why these messages are being given: it is the Lord's occasion for telling us about it - what we ought to see, and what we ought to do.

For brevity's sake, I am going to gather all this up into three little words:

Verse 5: "Then said I, Woe...!"

Verse 7: "He touched my mouth with it, and said, Lo..."

"And he said, Go..."

'Woe!', 'Lo!' and 'Go!' That sums it all up; everything is gathered into that.

Let me say at once that what we are speaking of relates to fellowship with God in His purpose. This is not a message to unsaved people: this is a message to the Church, a message to the people of God; and it has to do pre-eminently, fundamentally, with fellowship with God IN HIS PURPOSE.

'WOE!'

"Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips..."

Isaiah was not what we would now call an 'unsaved' man. He was a chosen servant of God, and, as we now know, a very, very valuable servant of God. And, seeing that this vision was given to him, and all this happened in his experience, as a servant of God, it quite strongly says that these are the things which go to constitute such a ministry - a ministry in fel

lowship with God concerning His purpose. Yes, and - one says it deliberately - a part of the very foundation of such a ministry, of the very preparation of such a vessel, is this word, 'Woe!' The sinner not knowing the Lord, coming under conviction of sin, might utter that word. It ought, indeed, to be the very first word of a sinner coming to the Lord. But here it is the word, the expression, of a prophet, the exclamation of a chosen servant of God.

Now, remember that the man himself was in this condition before he cried, 'Woe!', and had probably been in it for a long time. Things around him, too, as you will see, were in a pretty bad state, and had been like this for a long time, and he was involved in them. Yet it seems that he had not been stung into the realisation of his own state, and of the real state of things around him. No doubt he had deplored it, no doubt he had felt bad about many things; no doubt he had grieved over the evident declension; but it would seem that not until this moment did he become fully alive to his own condition and the condition around him. What was it that did it?

You know, it is quite possible for us to have much to say about the evils and the wrongs in the world around us, to be quite prepared to admit that we ourselves are anything but perfect, that there is indeed much that is not right about us, without that being an adequate basis for our serving God in this sense - that is, concerning His full purpose. The full purpose of God requires something deeper than that. And so it had to be brought home to the prophet. And what was it that did it?

Well, of course, he 'saw the Lord'. And he heard: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts". And when he really came into touch with the Lord, in this vital way, the first effect was a realisation of the awful state of his own heart, and of the nation around him. And we shall not be of much use to the Lord unless that double sense is with us in an overwhelming way. We must come into touch with the Lord.

Now, we have been talking about 'vision', but let us for the moment forget that word. It is a word that, for most people, conjures up all sorts of things, and might provoke such questions as: 'What do you mean by a vision of the Lord? I have never had such a vision. Am I to have a vision of the Lord? Are you expecting ME to have a vision of the Lord? Do you expect something like this to happen to ME?' Instead of speaking of 'vision', let us simply speak of 'coming, in a living way, into touch with the Lord.'

For after all, that is what it amounts to, and that can happen without any objective visions. A real touch with the Lord will inevitably result in this. It is the declaration of a fact, and it is also a test of our relationship to the Lord. Those who really are in touch with God, those who really have this living relatedness with Him, those who really walk near to Him, are the people who carry with them this - not temporary, desultory, occasional ejaculation, but - abiding consciousness of the WOE of their own state - put that in many ways - their utter worthlessness! "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18). Any complacency, self-satisfaction, insensitiveness to sin; any absence of an agony and an anguish over evil, means distance from God. The further you get away from God, the less are you troubled by the sense of sin. The nearer you get to God, the more acute becomes this consciousness. And if He draws near, if the Lord comes into any place or any life, this is the thing that happens.

Now look! 'This One', said John, 'this One whom Isaiah saw, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up - this One was the Lord Jesus; and He came down from that throne. This One, this same One, is "Holy, holy, holy"; it is this very One.' Oh, is it not overwhelming that the One about whom the seraphim were crying 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts' - that that One was Jesus! But if He left His throne in glory, if He has come out of Heaven to this world, He has not left behind His holiness. Look! He is here, and His very presence has the effect of creating a spontaneous outburst. His enemies - they cannot remain quiescent; the evil powers - they cannot remain silent; sinners - they come to His feet. His presence, without His saying anything, means that men begin to make confessions. Sincere, honest people begin to seek Him. Sinners, stricken with the consciousness of sin, say: 'Depart from me - I am a sinful man, O Lord!' The evil people cannot bear this presence, they cannot endure the presence of His holiness. The presence of God is like that!

Look again! Here is Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee: 'as concerning the righteousness which is of the law, found blameless' (Phil. 3:6). That, he tells us, was the verdict of his contemporaries. Not much room for consciousness of sin there, is there? On his way to Damascus he meets Jesus Christ; he sees the Lord high and lifted up. What does he say? The erstwhile self-congratulating, righteous Pharisee writes to Timothy: "...sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). He has seen the Lord, and that is the effect.

Job, all through those long chapters of the book which goes by his name, is trying to justify himself, and his friends are saying so: 'Job is all the time trying to justify himself - to put himself right with God and man.' It is a long and terrible story, until the Lord meets him. When his friends at last are silent, the Lord comes in and says: "Who is this that darkeneth cou

...declare thou unto me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?..." (38:2-4). And so on. He meets the Lord. What is the end? "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee, WHEREFORE I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5,6). He has seen the Lord, he has met the Lord, he has been in the presence of the Lord.

We have quoted Peter. Peter was a very self-assured, self-confident sort of fellow. But one day, in the presence of the Lord Jesus, something of that majesty broke in upon him, and he cried "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). It is just that; it is a real test. A life that is really in touch with God can have no pride, no conceit, no arrogance, no self-complacency; it cannot be hard and cruel toward people who are faulty and failing; it knows its own heart too well. That is essential in a ministry that is going to lead to spiritual fullness.

A simple little story is told of a girl who started a little class amongst slum children, poor little be-grimed girls, ragged and dirty, who never knew much about soap and water. She gathered them together, and wondered how she could give them some sense of another kind of life. And so she brought along a beautiful, white lily; a large, white, perfect lily. They gathered round; she didn't say anything; she held it up in front of them; then she passed it round. 'Would you like to feel it? Would you like to look into it?' A grimy little girl, in all her mess and tatters, reached out a grubby hand to touch the lily; and as it got nearer the flower, she suddenly saw herself. She saw the contrast between the hand and the lily, and drew back. She rushed out of the meeting, ran home, sought out all the soap that she could find, washed herself, put on some cleaner clothes, did her hair, and came back. And not a word spoken!

That is only a very simple illustration. But a little touch with the real thing, a real touch with the Lord, should shock us, should really show us ourselves. The background and basis of any real spiritual value to the Lord is a sense of His holiness and the contrast between Him and ourselves. It must begin there; there can be no rushing in.

For I must remind you that Uzziah forced his way into the Holy Place, and took up the censer to offer incense unlawfully. Something that had no right to do so pressed into the presence of God, and God smote it. And the leprosy which broke out upon his countenance was only a symbol of what was in his heart. When Isaiah cried: "I am a man of unclean lips", do not forget that he had seen Uzziah, and had heard the leper calling: "Unclean, unclean" For it was a part of the law that all lepers must do that, to let everyone know; he had to pronounce his own uncleanness. It was that to which Isaiah was referring: "I am a man of unclean lips" - 'I am really no better than Uzziah: I am a leper.'

That is the first phase: 'Woe! Woe! Woe is me!'

'LO!'

"And he touched my mouth... and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged."

There is a very great deal implied in this whole symbolic setting. One of the seraphim, on hearing this cry of woe, this confession of need and undoneness, went to the altar - evidently the GREAT altar - and, with tongs, took up a live coal, brought it over and touched the prophet's lips. Remember that the lips are always the symbol of the heart, for it is out of the heart that we speak. He touched his lips with that LIVE coal. It was not from the sacrifice of last week - that would have been dead coal; it was not even the sacrifice of yesterday - that would have been dead coal, too. Right up to the moment, the coal was still burning: evidently the sacrifice had just been offered, the altar was drenched with blood.

You have here three things: an altar, a burning coal, and (by implication) shed blood - everything that goes to make up the Cross of the Lord Jesus. It is not a little impressive that, in that scene in Heaven in the fifth chapter of the book of the Revelation, where the Lamb is seen in the midst of the throne, the literal statement is: 'as though it had JUST been slain' (v. 6). Right up to the moment, right up to date, this thing is still alive, it is still virtuous, it is eternally efficacious. It was an up-to-the-moment thing that happened. In the symbolism of the burning fire you have the Holy Spirit, operating on the virtue of the Blood and of the Cross of the Lord Jesus, creating the basis of this service. This kind of service, in relation to God's full purpose, requires that all this shall be in the experience of a man or a woman, right up to date: a knowledge of the tremendous efficacy of the Blood of Jesus.

The real servant of God does not make light of the Blood. He makes a very great deal of the Blood, knowing that that Blood needs to be permanently efficacious for him. "The blood of Jesus" - you know the words of the text - "the blood of Jesus his Son KEEPS ON cleansing us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). The true servant of God, one who is related to His full purpose, rests upon the continuous, moment-by-moment, up-to-the-moment efficacy of the Blood of the Lamb, and upon the

the mighty power of the Holy Spirit, as fire. He rests, too, upon the separating work of the Cross. Remember that that word 'holy' (the seraphim cried: 'Holy, holy...') literally means 'separate'. He is separate. The statement about Jesus is: "separated from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). The Cross is the place of the separation, the dividing; that is its meaning. And the separation is not only a separation from the world - it is our separation from ourselves.

It is, then, the EXPERIENCE of those mighty energies of the Blood, the Cross and the Spirit, on the part of the Lord's people, of servants of God, that is foundational to true ministry. It is not the doctrine, the theory, the truth, objectively or mentally held. We may know all that the Bible has to say about the Blood, about altars, about the Cross, about the Holy Spirit, and yet the reality may not be a deeply applied thing in our being. And that is the tragedy of many a life, even of servants of God today. They may be able to give you all that the Bible has to say on these 'subjects', and yet it may mean nothing; it may be mere cleverness or interest. What God wants is men and women who have been TOUCHED in their inner being by the power of the Blood, by the power of the Spirit, by the separating work of the Cross.

'GO!'

"Then I said, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go..."

Go! You never get that opportunity given by God Himself unless these other things are true. You may take up Christian work, but a Divine, 'apostolic' commissioning does rest upon these other two things. (Do not misunderstand my use of that word 'apostolic'. I am only interpreting: it just means being 'sent'. We all ought to be 'sent ones'; the Church ought to be a sent body.) But thank God for His response to the prophet's "Woe is me!" The seraph said, "Lo"! That was grace! A man like that, who is not exaggerating his condition - it was true, far more true than perhaps he realised, although he cried "Woe!" - a man like that could be visited in this way, and commissioned. Oh, mighty grace! If you had asked Isaiah in the ensuing years how he came to be God's servant, he would say: 'Just by the grace of God - that is all! If you knew what I came to know about myself, you would realise that this would never be the place for me, but for the grace of God! Marvellous grace!'

For, although it sounds so elementary and simple, it is nevertheless profoundly true; that anything that we are allowed to do in relation to the Lord and His purpose must bring to us an overwhelming sense of the grace of God. When we are young men and women, we are all ambitious to get into God's work, to be preaching, speaking, and all that sort of thing. But as we go on, that kind of thing has a strange way of changing, and we come to the place where we say: 'God forbid that I should ever be on a platform, unless - unless - He puts me there. As long as I can keep off it I will; I will only be there because the Lord makes me get there. Because - who am I? Who am I, that I should talk to other people? What am I that I should seem to be standing before them?' That will grow as you walk with God. It is bound to be like that. It will be of the infinite grace of God that you will have any place at all in His purpose.

Here, He says: 'Go!' And the 'Go!', as you see, is following upon this sense of sin, and the overwhelming of Divine grace. And then - "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" The Lord put it in the form of an interrogation. "Who will go FOR US?" Do you get that? 'WE are in need!' - the triune God! It is the plural, "for US". 'We have need of helpers; We are in need of someone to go.' "Who will go FOR US?" This tests the motive for all service. What is it for? a reputation? self-gratification? Or is it 'for Us'?

'For Us!' There is far more in that than it sounds. I always come back to this great man, Paul. I am perfectly sure that he would not have gone on very far in his work, if it had been for himself; to make a name for himself; to find gratification for himself; or for anything, other than that his heart had been absolutely captured by the Lord. It was for the Lord: "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). The Lord had 'got' him! It was a great love relationship. It is true, from one standpoint, that we are chosen. The Lord said: "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). We are chosen and apprehended. In one sense, we cannot help ourselves; we are the prisoners of Jesus Christ. That is one side of it. But there is another side that is equally true. It is that the Lord asks for our hearts: He appeals to us as to whether He can have us. He has chosen us, but can He HAVE us? Even though it is true that we are under the mighty constraint, will we voluntarily go with Him and for Him?

There was a day when David, tired, weary and thirsty, made an ejaculation, not perhaps intending that anyone should hear. Somehow David was a man who was always making ejaculations. If you look at the Psalms, you can see that he is always just breaking out about something: 'Oh that men would praise the Lord!' Oh! this... and Oh! that...! He seems to have been a man like that. That is how it was on that day. He just gave expression to a sigh, putting a thought into words: 'Oh for a drink of the water of the well at Bethlehem!' And some of his men who were standing near him heard. They took their swords, broke through the encompassing hosts of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem, and brought it back to David.

ught it to David. What did David say? He poured it out before the Lord, and said: 'This is the very life of the men who drew it; I cannot drink that'. (1 Sam. 23:14-17).

You see the point. These men had such a loyalty, such a devotion to their lord, that he only had to ejaculate something, and they would risk their lives for him; they would take their lives in their hands for his satisfaction. Is not that what is here with Isaiah? 'For Us! For Us!' The Lord is saying: 'Oh, for somebody like this!' "Who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I; send me." And the Lord replied, in effect: 'You are the man I want! That is what I want - a man with this experience, a man with this basis. Go! Go!'

Now, if you are feeling that all that I have said is not really necessary for the Lord's service; if you think I have been 'piling it on' rather heavily - 'Surely we can be servants of the Lord without all that!' - if you think I am making a lot of it, making the Lord's service complicated, difficult, involved, laying down more than is really necessary: read what follows - read the commission, and I venture to say that, if you had to do the work that Isaiah had to do, you would never do it without Isaiah's foundation.

"Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed."

That was carried right on to the days of the Lord Jesus. John said: 'This thing that Isaiah was told to do is here with us to day.' "Though he had done so many signs before them, yet they believed not on him: that the word of Isaiah... might be fulfilled" (John 12:37,38). Right along there in the days of the Lord Jesus, the work that Isaiah did stands. Of course it carries a very solemn message, and perhaps it carries a very big problem for us. But it simply means this - that these people had persistently, and hitherto with impunity, resisted the Word of God by the prophets; and it is a terrible thing to do that. If you do that long enough, there comes a time when you will not be able to believe when you want to, you will not be able to understand when you want to. You have brought your own judgment upon you. That is a terrible thing! It is the explanation of Israel's doom.

But let us leave that aside. Here is a man who has to 'go', and the effect of his ministry is only to be the hardening of many people. That is not pleasant ministry! It is going to create a good many enemies. The Lord said to Ezekiel: 'Son of man, I send you not to a people of a strange language and tongue, that you cannot understand: if I sent you to them, they would believe, they would receive your word; but I send you to the house of Israel, and they will not listen! that is where your difficulty lies' (Ezek. 3:4-7). Very strange! The come-back is so often from Christian people themselves. The real fight arises in that realm, more than in any other. The hardest work of all is the work of having to deal with 'traditional Israel'. It is not easy.

But Isaiah was vindicated! "A remnant shall return" (7:3, marg.). That is the great word that springs out of his ministry. There were millions that went away into captivity under this judgment, but only forty-two thousand and a few more came back. "A remnant shall return", indeed - but he was vindicated in the remnant!

And God always has a remnant. We must leave the others. I do not expect, for one moment, that all Christians are going to accept God's full revelation as to His purpose. It would be folly to think that they will - they will not! You will find your main resistance from Christians, strangely enough. It is true! But, the vindication is in a remnant: a remnant shall return. Compared with the millions, the forty-two thousand may be very small; but the word of the prophet is: "Who hath despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10).