

DETOUR TO THE PROPHETS: ISAIAH

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

Isaiah 6:3

"And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'"

FAITH STORY:

Isaiah 6:1-13

FAITH FOCUS:

The man Isaiah became the prophet Isaiah after a startling vision he experienced from God. In this vision, Isaiah saw firsthand God's indescribable glory and holiness. In light of that holiness, he was terrified because of his sin and the sin of his people. One of the seraphs touched his mouth with a live coal and his guilt was removed. Then Isaiah could say yes to God's call on his life. But his life as a prophet would be sad and difficult for God told him that his people would not listen.

SESSION GOAL:

Help the students compare the holiness of God with the sinfulness of human lives.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will have:

- Read Isaiah 6:1-13 and make a list of words and phrases that describe God's holiness
- Write down the steps for how God calls people for a special ministry
- Discuss how they experience God
- Sit in silence, considering God's holiness and their sin

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 A theater and the backstage of a theater (Focus, Option #1)
- 3 Magazines, glue, scissors and poster board (Focus, Option #2)
- 4 Worship song about holiness
- 5 Fire pit, 1 live coal and a pie pan for each student and tongs (Respond, Option #2)

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5–8 minutes)

Option #1: Ask the youth to meet for this study in the backstage area of a local theater. This place, with its many mirrors and banks of lights, can help your group visually compare the

“light” of God’s holiness that illuminates the “darkness” of human sin.

Begin the session with the students facing the mirrors, but with the special lights off. Then, switch the lights on. (Most costume/makeup areas have many light bulbs surrounding the mirrors that create a very bright light. In this kind of light, every pimple, wrinkle and imperfection on one’s face is noticeable.) Ask the students, *What do you see now that you didn’t see before we turned the lights on? What do you wish you didn’t see?*

Option #2: When the youth gather, ask them to thumb through magazines and find pictures that illustrate the word “holy.” Give them glue and poster board and let them each make a collage of that word.

CONNECT: (5–8 minutes)

Option #1: Now ask, *“How is God’s glory like theater lights?”*

Option #2: Direct each student to show his or her collage and explain it. Then ask, *“Now how much of this collage is like your life?”*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (18–20 minutes)

Read Isaiah 6:1-13. Ask the youth to search the chapter for all the ways it illustrates the power, holiness and majesty of God. Have them look for parts of the chapter that even show a scary side of God. Examples they should find include: throne, high and lofty, hem of his robe filled the temple, seraphs, holy, whole earth is full of his glory, pivots shook, house filled with smoke, Isaiah is terrified, Isaiah needed to have his sin removed. Have a Bible dictionary handy to look up words like seraph.

Ask these questions:

- *Why do you think the seraphs covered their faces and their feet?*
- *Why was Isaiah terrified? Should he have been?*
- *What do you think the live coal represented? Why was this important? Why specifically the mouth?*

Make these points:

- God is very, very holy. And when people come into contact with this holiness, they see the vast difference between God’s holiness and their sin. That’s the significance of the seraphs covering themselves and why Isaiah was so afraid.
- The live coal represented the cleansing of sin. It also represented *dabar*, the Hebrew concept of God giving prophets special power in the words they speak. If a person has *dabar*, their words come from God and whatever they say happens.

Divide the group into smaller groups of two or three. Ask them to read the chapter again and see if they can come up with a pattern for how a prophet or one who receives *dabar* is called. After 4 minutes call them back together and ask one group to report. Then have the other groups comment on how their pattern was the same or different.

Their patterns should be similar to this:

- The person experience God’s holiness in a new way.
- The person realizes his or her guilt and sin in a new way and feels great sorrow and repentance or even fear.
- God provides a way of cleansing for the sin.
- God gives out a calling for a special task (Whom shall I send?)
- The person responds positively to the call.
- God gives more specific details (what to say and how to say it.)

APPLY: (6–8 minutes)

Direct the youth to place themselves on a continuum, an invisible line with two extremes. Use these questions as the poles of your continuum.

- If one end of the line is “Jesus is my buddy” and the other end of the line is “God is so holy I am terrified” where would you put yourself on the line?
- Now, if one end is “Jesus is my buddy” and the other end is “God is so holy I am afraid” where do you think you **should be** on the line?
- If one end of the line is “everyone is called by God” and the other end is “God only calls special people,” where would you put yourself on the line? Can both of these statements be equally true?

Now call the students back to sit in a circle. Review the steps or pattern for how a prophet receives the call. Say, *“In some way, God does call all of us. We are called to live like Jesus; we are called to be different from the rest of the world. In a nutshell, we are called to be Christian. So these steps are important. We sense who God is and we see our own sin. God takes away our sin and then we can hear more clearly what God wants us to do. But in another sense, God gives a special calling to only some people. Can you give examples of the kinds of people who receive a special calling from God?”* The students may respond by listing pastors, evangelists, missionaries, youth pastors and sponsors, pastoral counselors, etc. Say, *“Perhaps some of you feel this call from God in your life right now. You hear God saying to you like he said to Isaiah, “Whom shall we send?” If you want to ever talk about this calling you have, please feel free to come see me.”* (If your group shares freely with each other, it may even be appropriate to ask students to share about their sense of call within the group itself.)

RESPOND: (10 minutes)

Option #1: Go into the stage area of the theater and have the stage manager turn on the theater lights for you (hopefully they will be brighter than normal lighting). Also prepare the stage manager to turn on some worship music for you when the students begin to pray. Instruct the students to find a spot by themselves somewhere on the stage. They are to take this time to silently stand before God’s throne. Here they may need to just appreciate God’s holiness in a greater way. Maybe they have sin they need to confess. Or this may be the time when they need to hear God’s call and say yes to that call. While they meet with God as individuals, you also find a spot and pray for each student. After 7 minutes, call the group

together and again and close with a worship song about holiness and prayer.

Option #2: Take the students outside (if possible) to a fire pit, where live coals (one for each student) are burning (perhaps you can start the coals burning before the session and at this point they are glowing). Give each student an aluminum pie tin. As they sit in a circle around the fire, say *"We can't see God like Isaiah did. Maybe that's good, because that would be scary. But like Isaiah, God wants us to experience his holiness in a deeper way. God wants us to see our own lives, our own uncleanness in comparison to his glory and holiness. And seeing that, to cry out in sorrow and have our sins cleansed. And God is faithful in cleansing that sin. Let this coal, placed in front of you, be that sign of God's holiness, God's forgiveness and God's call on your life."* In silence, using a metal tongs, take a live coal and place it in each student's pie pan. (Younger students may be too tempted to touch the coal, so don't do this part if it is too risky.) After 5 minutes, lead in a worship song and prayer.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah was a prophet of Judah (the southern kingdom) from 740 (the year King Uzziah died, chapter 6) through the Assyrian invasion led by Sennacherib. Much of this time, Judah lived in fear of the world power Assyria. They watched as Assyria defeated Israel, their sister nation to the north. Isaiah loved Jerusalem and her kings and believed that God would favor Judah forever because of them. But he also knew that unless the people of Judah changed their ways, great punishment would come.

Isaiah became a prophet through a stunning vision. In this vision, the LORD was sitting on a throne high above the temple. The hem of his robe filled the sanctuary. Seraphs, known as fiery creatures, called out to one another about God's immense glory and holiness. Four of their six wings they used to cover their faces and feet, for such was God's holiness.

Isaiah also noticed God's holiness and he was terrified. His lips and the lips of his people were unclean. To see God in such a sinful state surely meant death.

But one of the seraphs took a live coal from the altar and touched Isaiah's mouth with it. This act represented God's cleansing of his sin. Most likely the touching of the mouth also represented *dabar*. *Dabar*, the Hebrew concept of the power of words, came to every prophet. (See Jeremiah 1:9 and I Samuel 3:19). *Dabar* meant that the prophet's word would act like missiles, accomplishing God's will. *Dabar* was the only "weapon" a prophet had.

His guilt gone, Isaiah could now hear and accept the LORD's special calling. But the message was a sad one. The people's sin was so great that destruction was inevitable. The people could no longer hear and repent. Yahweh's patience had run out. Isaiah cried, "How long?" as he perceived the awful destruction to come. But there was hope! The stump from the felled tree would grow again. A remnant of faithful people would emerge after the destruction.