

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah

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Isaiah 6:1-5 – The Holiness of God

1 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” 8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.”

We looked at Isaiah 2 last week and saw God’s enormous vision for the world. Peace. Prosperity. God’s presence. Worship. The nations gathered.

But, if we were to think of this sort of well-being, this shalom, this goodness, on our campus – how in the world is this going to happen? Really. How?

Most of us would say, well, things are going to have to change. The Democrats are the problem. The Republicans are the problem. The homeschoolers. The pro-choicers. The greedy white collar workers. The deadbeat dads. The freeloaders. Wal-Mart. Communism. Terrorists. The illiterate. The fundamentalists. The Europeans. The Americans. The Texans.

Somebody has to be the problem. If we could just fix *them or that*, then we’d be in business. That’s how we’re going to change the world. Right?

In Isaiah 6, we’re looking at what happens when a great person comes into the presence of a great God. This is the passage that tells us about why Isaiah is writing this book in the first place, so it’s like looking at an autobiography to find out more about what makes a man great. And we’re hoping to find something that might give us an incentive to believe that Isaiah 2 could actually happen. We’ll look at the three characters and the three actions. First the three characters.

Uzziah

Isaiah makes it a point to root this incident in a specific time and place. He writes, *In the year that King Uzziah died.*

You can find out about King Uzziah by looking back at 2 Chronicles 26, a part of the Bible that may not be bookmarked for you. Uzziah reigned for 52 prosperous and successful years, and he began his reign in godliness. He sought after God and God blessed him. However, here is a sentence you don’t want to read about yourself: *“But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction.”* (2 Chron. 16:16) Uzziah tried to play God and boldly entered the temple, claiming for himself the rights that God had only given the priests. The priests tried to stop him, and Uzziah raged in fury, and then leprosy broke out on his head. Uzziah was quarantined, and he died a leper for flouting God’s holiness; *“The king died as he had lived, estranged and unclean.”*²

This is the time of the day. It’s a time of crisis for the nation. *“Judah had known no king like Uzziah since the time of Solomon. He had been an efficient administrator and an able military leader. Under his leadership Judah had grown in every way (2 Chron. 26:1-15). He had been a true king. How easy it must have been to focus one’s hopes and trust upon a king like that.”*³ Indeed. The people must have been asking *“What will happen? Who will lead us?”* They were tempted to turn to temporal hopes. The king had died. This is a time of extreme vulnerability for this nation. When a nation loses its king, often the nations around it swoop in and take over to fill the power vacuum. Assyria looms in the background, a hostile nation known for carting its prisoners off with fish hooks in their mouths.

What do you turn to in times of crisis? Where is your hope placed? Do you ever ask, Who is in charge here? What is the answer to those questions for you?

Isaiah

The next character in the story is marked by the word, “I.” Who is I? Isaiah ben Amoz, the prophet who wrote this book. The prophets often came from poverty and obscurity, but not Isaiah. Jewish tradition tells us that he came from nobility and was a recognized statesman, perhaps even a member of the royal family. Isaiah had access to the courts of the day, and God used him to speak to the kings.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Orland, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Motyer, 69

³ Oswalt, 177

Isaiah was a big shot. He was in the power society. He had it made. And, as if that isn't enough, he was also considered the most holy and righteous man of his day. So he was a good person at the highest end of the social, political scene. He was definitely a Big Man On Campus. Big Man On Israel.

Is that you? Are you a good person? Are you from a good family, a good job, a good major, a good career going, a good sorority or fraternity, a good morality structure, a good friend? Sure you are. And it's true. It's really true. You are good people here in this room. I wouldn't mind having you in my home or watching my kids or loaning my car to you.

When King Uzziah died, in the midst of political confusion and worry, a good man, high in social standing, high in religious morality, went to the temple to worship God. What he found there he didn't expect. Because he met the third character in our narrative. He met God.

God

Now this is really unusual, and Isaiah must have been shocked. Often we'll talk this way: "I met God there." Or "God's presence was really strong today." But that isn't the same thing as "*In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.*" You have to admit that you would be surprised if that happened next Sunday.

What do we see here when Isaiah sees God? The first thing is the amazement that it happens at all. Isaiah *saw* him. The Hebrews believed that normally to see God was to die. Various few individuals were allowed to see him, with an element of encouragement and confirmation involved. The expectation, however, for Isaiah is that he will soon be dead. (Which makes 1 John 3:2 all the more amazing.)

What did Isaiah see when he saw God? He saw the Lord. This isn't the personal name of God. That occurs in verse 5 – you can tell when you see the small caps – LORD. This is Lord. That is his title. He is the King. The Sovereign. He is the Lord. "The eyes of Isaiah were opened to see the real king of the nation. He saw God seated on the throne, the sovereign one."⁴ And kings sit on thrones, high and lifted up, with robes of majesty. This is the exalted King of the Universe. You might think that we should learn more about what God looks like here, after all, wouldn't that be interesting and helpful knowledge? But "words break down when one attempts to depict God himself.... There is a barrier beyond which the simply curious cannot penetrate. The experience is too personal, too awesome, too all-encompassing for mere reportage."⁵

All we know is that there are Seraphim around him. This is the only place we get this term, and we don't know really what these are except that they're heavenly creatures and the word "seraphim" means "fiery ones."

Annie Dillard writes "Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? ... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return."⁶

She puts it eloquently, but the basic question is: What would it be like to go to church on Sunday and actually meet God there?

Holiness

The seraphim propel us to our first action, which isn't really an action at all. They are all wings and voice, perfectly ready for praise and service, typifying the appropriate response to God's holiness. "The seraphs, by their words and actions, show that the appropriate response is service and praise."⁷ "*And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"*"

Here are these creatures flying around God who sits on a throne in a king's and a judge's robe, and they are singing a specific song. They cry out: Holy, Holy, Holy.

Holiness is a word that you are familiar with if you hang out in church. We sing a great hymn with that title. But what does it mean? Holiness is transcendence and righteousness. Holiness is distinctiveness. Holiness is uniqueness. Holiness is otherness or separateness. Holiness is superlative-ness, if that's a word.

If you put all these together, you see that God alone deserves to be called holy in the true and ultimate sense of the word. But he does call other things holy, to holy uses. He separates them to distinctiveness. There is a moral quality to this, of righteousness and right use. When we talk about holy things or holy people we mean set apart for right use. But God always does the right thing, so his holiness implies that.

But the seraphim don't cry out, *Holy is the Lord of hosts!* They say, *Holy, Holy, Holy.*

This is a peculiar aspect to Hebrew speech and writing. If you want to emphasize something, you repeat it. We do that sometimes, but not in writing. We underline or italicize or put an exclamation point.⁸ The Hebrew language repeats it. You can find this in 2 Kings 25:15: *15 the fire pans also and the bowls. What was of gold the captain of the guard took away as gold, and what was of silver, as silver.* What you see in the Hebrew is that we're not just talking about gold, but about "gold-gold." Really

⁴ Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 21

⁵ Oswalt, 178

⁶ From *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

⁷ Webb, 59

⁸ Just last night I watched the Seinfeld episode (season 5) where Elaine breaks up with a guy because of his improper non-use of exclamation points.

gold. Another instance can be found in Gen 14:10: *Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country.* You see, these weren't just pits. They were "pit pits." These were the pittiest pits possible. In the New Testament, we see this when Jesus says, "Amen, Amen" which we translate "Truly, Truly." He's telling you that he's about to say something important, which we understand to be the very words of God.

So you understand the device here. But very seldom do you ever get a word repeated three times for emphasis. And no other attribute is trebled. God is Holy, Holy, Holy. Think about that. God isn't love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy or patient, patient, patient or just, just, just. He is Holy, Holy, Holy.

"His holiness is, therefore, is his unapproachable and unique moral majesty before which sinful humankind instinctively quakes."⁹ This holiness, righteous otherness, of God makes things shake and quake. You see smoke. *4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.* I don't know what you think about this, but my friends, this is not boring.

Another aspect of holiness that we don't often think about is that it really doesn't do anything for you.¹⁰ God's holiness is completely non-functional for you. In fact, the only thing it might help you with is fear. God's love is helpful to you, as is, potentially at least, his wisdom, his strength, his kingship, his mercy, his justice. But his holiness – how can you like that?

But to fall in love with God is just that – to stop using him for what he gets you. Let's say you are about to come into a big inheritance, and you fall in love and get engaged. Right before the wedding, you find out that you won't be getting the money after all. That's disappointing. But then your fiancé calls off the wedding. Why? Because he or she wanted you to get the money. How would you feel?

That's how many of us treat God. I will love you, God, if you give me stuff from your storehouse of blessings. But God says, I want you to love me because of who I am. Because of my beauty, not my functionality. That's what you want to hear in marriage after all. God is much more beautiful and captivating than that.

The seraphim also tell us one other thing. They sing that God's holiness and glory are not confined to the temple. These attribute, and by extension God himself, fills the whole earth.

What do people do when they are in the presence of greatness?

I haven't been around greatness very many times¹¹, but it's always both attractive and disturbing at the same time. I went to a small enough high school that I was able to be involved in a ton of activities. I played baseball, football and basketball. I played in the jazz band (jazz tuba!). I dabbled in some art and writing projects.

Not to brag on myself, I started on the varsity basketball team. I thought I was a decent player. I could have been much better. I used to dream of playing ball in college, but knew that that wasn't a reality. Since then, I've played basketball with Division I basketball players in the rec center. They are incredible. Absolutely incredible. When I was on the court with them, all of sudden I felt really puny. Really slow. I was made painfully aware of my lack of jumping ability. Of how I am not a good shooter. So, I'd close off my game and start passing. And to think that these aren't even the best basketball players in the world. There are better ones. What would it be like to play with Michael Jordan? Humbling. Embarrassing.

There are other situations like that. You're a good singer from Newcastle. Then you get to the university and find out you're the thousandth best singer in your class. Or you move to Nashville and find out there are five thousand others better than you trying to make it. You're a great painter from Ada and you enter the art department and find out you can't pass your classes. You're a charismatic person, and then you run into Barry Switzer and watch in awe how he utterly commands a room. You like to study the Bible and teach, and then you are able to listen to Sinclair Ferguson for a day and you're not quite as confident in your own abilities.¹²

What is it that *you* think about yourself? You think you're pretty, fast, smart, a hard worker, righteous, moral, wise, a snappy dresser... what is it?

Now, you've walked into God at church. You're there almost by yourself. You're the only human in the room. However, there are other creatures and they are fiery and they are singing about God's incredible, magnificent, mind-blowing holiness. This should be both attractive and disturbing. You cannot believe what you're seeing – and you are instantly aware of your mediocrity and fallenness in whatever category you can think of. The very best part of me is rendered unclean, wrong, distorted, twisted. If your response isn't one of complete humility in the presence of such greatness, then you're missing something really important. What do you do? What do you feel?

Cleansing

Here's what you feel – terror. You don't feel cozy. You don't feel warm and fuzzy. You don't feel filled with the Spirit. You don't feel special. You feel terrified. *5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"* "The vision of God produces not rapture but sheer terror in the prophet. He knows himself to be utterly ruined, for two reasons: he is unclean and he has seen God."¹³

⁹ Motyer, 71

¹⁰ This illustration comes from Keller (and he says he got it from Jonathan Edwards).

¹¹ On the day of this message, I did pilates for the first time. I was next to two women, both in their 60s or 70s. I cannot touch my toes. They were pilates masters. I was in the presence of pilates greatness and was ashamed.

¹² Some of these *may* have happened to me.

¹³ Webb, 59

I really don't like the ESV translation that renders the word "lost" there. Lost? The word should be undone, ruined, cut off or destroyed. Other translations bring this out much better. Not lost, unless you mean that you have no hope at all. That sort of utter lostness. But undone is the best. Or ruined. This word, ruined/undone is from "to be silenced." To be silenced is to be dead. Those who have been buried have been reduced to silence. Isaiah is a goner.

Isaiah's first words are a pronouncement of Woe – on himself. Now he's been pronouncing a lot of Woe to others. Just back for a second and look at chapter 5, which is a whole chapter of Woe. Here's an example starting in verse 20: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! 22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, 23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!*

Woe is bad. Real bad. You don't want to hear Woe.

But Isaiah isn't saying, "Woe are you!" He's now saying "Woe is me!" He is pronouncing judgment on himself. Remember this is a prominent, good man. In the presence of God, degrees of sin have become irrelevant. He isn't comparing himself to anyone else. Just to God. And compared to God, he is nothing. This is the point where the prophet becomes aware of himself. This is personal. He isn't talking about "them" anymore, but he's talking about himself.

God hasn't said one thing to him. Just by being in his presence, Isaiah practically comes apart. That's what I'm undone means. He's disintegrating. He's lost. He's ruined. He's cut off. He's undone. "Such confrontation cannot help but produce despair. For the finite, the mortal, the incomplete, the fallible to encounter the Infinite, the Eternal, the Self-Consistent, and the Infallible is to know the futility and the hopelessness of one's existence."¹⁴ "Modern existential angst is a species of such despair, for confronted with the apparent meaninglessness of our existence in this universe, we wonder why we should go on living. Existentialism presumes there is no meaning in the universe and that we are thus meaningless. Isaiah knows, more horribly, that there is Meaning, but that he has no part in it."¹⁵

He says *for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*" Isaiah's uncleanness is moral, for it is associated with the lips and therefore the heart. "Isaiah cannot praise and serve God as the seraphs do because in the depths of his being, he is unclean, just as his compatriots are."¹⁶ "But it is not the recognition of his finitude which crushes Isaiah; it is his uncleanness."¹⁷ It's not his essence that is in question, but his character.

Isaiah is ruined. "Isaiah finds himself totally excluded and recognizes its consequence (I am ruined) and its cause (unclean lips). Do you feel Isaiah for a second here?"

What do you think will happen next? Isaiah is willing to acknowledge his condition, but he expects to die right here, right on the spot. It's interesting that Isaiah doesn't cry out for mercy or vow to do better. He has put his head on the block, knowing that he deserves whatever it is he gets.

What he gets, then, is all of God's initiative. One of the seraphim goes to the altar, takes a burning coal and comes at Isaiah's mouth with it. He touches Isaiah's felt need – his lips but cleanses Isaiah's real cause – the guilt, inner corruption, and real wrong he has done. The seraphim says, "*Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.*"

Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. Those are beautiful words. Those are live-giving words. The coal and altar symbolize the entire provision which God had made in the temple and its services for the sins of his people. Isaiah is cleansed, not by his own efforts, but purely by the grace of God."¹⁸ "The live coal thus encapsulates the ideas of atonement, propitiation, satisfaction, forgiveness; cleansing and reconciliation, and of these spiritual realities to Isaiah, the erstwhile doomed sinner, is left in no doubt when the seraph explains: 'Behold, as soon as this touched your lips your iniquity went, and, as for your sin – paid by ransom!'"¹⁹

"When God takes away the iniquity and sin in which we have lived for years, the experience is a wrenching, searing one. But more deeply, what causes sin and iniquity? It is that arrogant self-sufficiency which refuses to bow the knee. This is the ultimate uncleanness of which Isaiah has been accusing his people and now finds resident in himself. This spirit never gives us without a fight. Apart from the fires of self-surrender and divine surgery the clean heart is an impossibility."²⁰

Have you experienced this sort of forgiveness? Have you been touched by God in this way, seeing the amazing grace he offers to you?

Commissioning

If you have experienced this, then there will be a response from you. Look at what happens next in verse 8: *8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."*

For the first time, God speaks, as if Isaiah were not ready for this moment until he had been cleansed.

¹⁴ Oswalt, 182

¹⁵ Oswalt, 182-183

¹⁶ Webb, 60

¹⁷ Oswalt, 183

¹⁸ Webb, 60

¹⁹ Motyer, 72

²⁰ Oswalt, 185

“God makes it plain that while spiritual experience is never merely a means to an end, neither is it an end in itself.”²¹ In other words, Isaiah finds that being joined to God means being joined to a missionary society. He discovers that he has been brought in in order to be sent out.²² The Lord seeks a messenger, and Isaiah, now cleansed, is ready and willing to be his mouthpiece.²³ Now as a redeemed sinner, Isaiah is free to speak. “Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into nonexistence by the very holiness of God and having received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God’s service? Those who need to be coerced are perhaps too little aware of the immensity of God’s grace toward them.”²⁴

God did not annihilate Isaiah’s personal identity. Isaiah says, “Here am I.” He still had an “I”, an identity, a personality. God didn’t destroy the self, but redeemed it. It was overhauled, but not gone. Isaiah made an offering of himself, just like you read in Romans 12:1-2.

Can you say, “Here am I” to God? He’s a really big God, you know. He created a really big universe. He has a really big plan of redemption. Can God be more real to you than your needs? Can you be available to God, no matter what? Isaiah offers himself to God even before God tells him the job description. That is availability for sure. And Isaiah’s job wasn’t really that great of one – he was supposed to preach to people who would never come around. That’s what the rest of Isaiah 6 tells us. Personal fulfillment wasn’t on the top of Isaiah’s agenda – following God was.

Could you volunteer more of your time? Could you sacrifice your time? As you get to be older in school, or even out of school, as you understand grace more, could you be *more* gripped by the needs, instead of less gripped? Could you give more money than you think, even sacrificially, instead of none at all, or just enough so it doesn’t really affect you? Could your generosity actually change the way you live? Could you volunteer for a job at the church that doesn’t get you any applause or thank yous?²⁵

When you have God as a reality like this, you also have to have a hope. It might look like that won’t happen, but it will. The last verse in Isaiah 6 tells us so. There is a seed in the stump. As Tolkien wrote, Everything that is said will become untrue. Things are going to change. You may not see it, but it is happening. Do you believe in this? Does this grip you? Wouldn’t this affect the world? RUF? Our university?

I left out one thing about God that I want to bring up here at the conclusion. The word for glory that you see in the text is the word *Kavod*, and this means heaviness or weight. God is weighty. Think about that.²⁶

Here’s what I mean. For some of you, for most of Americans I might dare say, God is just a concept. He’s an idea. He has no *Kavod*, no weight. You can see this when you hear people say, “Well, I used to believe in God but then this happened and I just can’t buy that anymore.” Or “I believe this and this from the people, but not that. My God can’t do that.” That is a conceptual God. He’s light. Airy. Cirrus. Wispy. You are heavier than God, weightier.

But notice when Isaiah found God at the temple. He didn’t say, “Oh, so you *do* exist after all.” Isaiah already believed that God existed. No, the weightiness of God overwhelmed him. It undid him. Remember? If God has glory then *he has to be able* to rearrange your beliefs. Do you shape the God concept or does God shape you? Does the God concept fit into your agenda and goals or do your goals and agenda fit into God? The Real God is heavier than you. Things give way to his glory. Things you’ve always believed are changed by his glory. He radically changes your agenda. Your safe, tidy life gets blown apart.

One of the things I like to point out in narratives or stories is that you should make an attempt to associate yourself with someone in the story. But, remember this, you’re never God or Jesus. You’re almost always the worst person in the story. That’s who you should identify with. Who are you in this story? Uzziah – he lived a good life, did well, but he died in seclusion and shame because of his pride. I don’t know if we’ll see him in heaven or not. The text doesn’t indicate the definitive answer to that, though I think it shades us toward a positive answer. Are you Uzziah? Do you think you can use God, that you can use church, the sacraments according to your own wishes?

Or are you Isaiah? Isaiah had a personal experience based on a transcended truth. He nearly died when he met God. He thought he was done for. He saw the Holy, Holy, Holy God and almost came apart. He would have, but for God’s grace and atonement for him. Has that ever happened to you? Do you believe in Concept God? Do you think he’s all love? Do you ever quake before him? If you’re not Isaiah, then do you have an experience? Jeremiah’s experience was different than Isaiah’s but he had one. Paul’s was different, but he met God on the road. There is no “one way” that this happens, but it has to happen.

If you really know God, you’ll shake and quake. At least sometimes. He won’t conform to your conceptions. He’ll baffle you. He’ll mystify you. He’ll reorder your priorities. He won’t change your agenda. He’ll give you a whole new agenda. He’ll send you out with a mission.

Has that happened? Do you recognize yourself as a sinner? As lost? As needy? I’m not talking about low self esteem, which is usually self-absorption, but I’m saying that you have see yourself as nothing when stacked up against real glory, real holiness, real superlative-ness. I’m talking about reality. And if you don’t see yourself this way, then you just haven’t seen God.

²¹ Oswalt, 185

²² Motyer, 72

²³ Webb, 60

²⁴ Oswalt, 186

²⁵ My friend Josh Spears says he heard this passage taught six times one semester at his Christian college. All were to prompt a missionary zeal. I think that is one possible application, but Isaiah wasn’t exactly a missionary and his message wasn’t exactly what I normally hear in churches today.

²⁶ What follows comes from Tim Keller’s sermon on this passage. Found at redeemer.com.

Have you really seen *God*? Do you know of a time when God switched from being a concept to a reality?

If you do see yourself this way, then you have to see God's forgiveness, his atonement for you. And if you understand that, then you have a mission. You have that new agenda we talked about. You have a message. You have a commissioning, a calling. One second after you realize you are more wicked and flawed than you ever dared believe, you also realize you are more loved and cherished than you ever could have ever thought possible through the grace of God.. It wasn't performance. It wasn't standards. It was grace. That is amazing. It is a bold humility. A new stability. That can change the world.

Jesus was undone for you. Jesus was shaken. Jesus received no seraphim when he felt God's turning from him. The temple shook when Jesus died on the cross. Because he was undone, you can be made right. Because he took the fire, you can be healed with it.

And if you understand this, if you have an Isaiah experience, then you will want to be involved in seeing Isaiah 2:1-5 come true. It will be a big enough vision to live for and give yourself to because you have tasted it in your own life.