

W H E N

T R O U B L E

C O M E S

P H I L R Y K E N

“Written by a sufferer who is also a skilled theologian-exegete, this book is honest, tender, full of grace, and bursting with the street-level wisdom of God’s Word. With story after story from Scripture, Dr. Ryken shows how the Bible accurately portrays our sufferings and how God meets us in the midst of them. Since suffering really is a universal human experience between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet,’ this is a book worth getting and living with. I found it to be enormously helpful, and you will too.”

**Paul David Tripp**, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *What Did You Expect?*

“Dr. Ryken is serving as the president of one of the most important Christian institutions of our time. Even in my work in the Middle East, I have been blessed by Wheaton College through my ongoing relationships with professors there and also through the many Wheaton graduates who have worked with me over the years. Dr. Ryken is there through both good times and difficult times, always leading with integrity and wisdom, so that Wheaton College can truly be ‘For Christ and His Kingdom.’ In this book, Dr. Ryken shows his characteristic integrity in his ability to be vulnerable before others in order that they might find solace in Jesus Christ. I am so pleased to fully endorse this book, written by a man I hold in highest esteem.”

**Canon Andrew White**, Vicar Emeritus, St. George’s Church, Baghdad, Iraq; President, Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East

“When trouble comes, most Christians want to escape it, deny or divorce it, or medicate or avoid it—we do everything but actually try to *live* with it! Thankfully, Dr. Ryken takes great pains in this remarkable book to show us how to live gladly and gloriously through our troubles. Rather than take us on a detour around our hardships, he serves as our guide *through* them. If you are finding it hard to ‘welcome trials as friends,’ *this* is the book for you.”

**Joni Eareckson Tada**, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“Few books present both comfort and challenge like *When Trouble Comes*. Dr. Ryken weaves his own story with the likes of Ruth, David, and Paul to illuminate God’s path to resilience. You will gain practical steps to hope when your own soul is troubled and a clear call to action when you witness pain in the world.”

**Lisa Beamer**, author, *Let’s Roll*

“*When Trouble Comes* is a profound book for people in profound trouble. We don’t need to go looking for it, of course. Sooner or later, some life-altering catastrophe that only God can get us through crashes into our lives. And God does help us, very wonderfully, as we fall into his loving arms. Dr. Ryken, a man I highly respect, gently shows us from the Bible how God cares for us when our very lives are on the line. May the Lord bless you as you read this encouraging book, even as he has blessed me.”

**Raymond C. Ortlund Jr.**, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“As much as we hate to admit it, trouble inevitably marks every one of our lives. The Preacher was right when he wrote in Ecclesiastes that all our ‘days are full of sorrow.’ *When Trouble Comes* assumes that trouble will come—and not just to people who are living in rebellion against God, but to those, even especially to those, who are seeking to live for God’s glory. With deep wisdom and broad scriptural insight, Dr. Ryken identifies the sources of our troubles and calls us to faith in the Son who endured suffering and enters into all our sorrows.”

**Elyse M. Fitzpatrick**, counselor; speaker; author, *Found in Him*

“All believers suffer, and sometimes we suffer in agonizing ways. Dr. Ryken helps us understand suffering from God’s perspective by telling the stories of biblical figures who endured suffering. His own story, related at the beginning of the book, is compelling and encouraging. We need energy and fuel to make it through the hard times, and Dr. Ryken gives us that fuel in this biblically saturated book.”

**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Deep meditation on Scripture has intersected with a wise understanding of human nature to yield a book that speaks earnestly to our lives. I have preached and taught on most of the biblical figures described in this book, but I learned many new truths as I read these studies.”

**Ajith Fernando**, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka;  
author, *The Call to Joy and Pain*



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T R O U B L E  
C O M E S

P H I L R Y K E N

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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To everyone who has ever prayed for  
me when I was in trouble,  
and to my gracious Lord, Jesus Christ,  
who has considered my trouble and  
forgiven all my sins (Ps. 25:18).



# Contents

Prologue: Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen.....	11
(Psalm 37:39–40)	
1 “ <i>Woe Is Me!</i> ” .....	25
Isaiah’s Sin and Guilt (Isaiah 6:1–8)	
2 “ <i>I’ve Had Enough</i> ” .....	39
Elijah’s Desperate Depression (1 Kings 19:1–18)	
3 “ <i>Where You Die I Will Die</i> ” .....	55
Ruth’s Grief and Poverty (Ruth 1:1–18)	
4 “ <i>You Are the Man!</i> ” .....	69
David’s Deadly Temptation (2 Samuel 11:1–5; 12:1–15)	
5 “ <i>Cursed Be the Day I Was Born!</i> ” .....	83
Jeremiah’s Disheartening Persecution (Jeremiah 20:1–18)	
6 “ <i>A Sword Will Pierce Your Own Soul Too</i> ”.....	97
Mary’s Troubled Soul (Luke 1:26–38; 2:22–35)	
7 “ <i>Now Is My Soul Troubled</i> ” .....	111
The Savior’s Suffering unto Death (John 12:20–33)	
8 “ <i>We Are Afflicted in Every Way</i> ” .....	123
Paul’s Light and Momentary Troubles (2 Corinthians 4:7–18)	

Epilogue: Here Comes Trouble! ..... 137  
(John 16:25–33)

Study Guide..... 149

Notes..... 163

General Index..... 168

Scripture Index..... 173

## Prologue

# Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen

(Psalm 37:39-40)

It was the spring semester of the academic year, and I was in trouble. Real trouble. Over the course of several long and difficult weeks, I fell deeper and deeper into discouragement until eventually there were days when I wondered if I had the will to live.

At the time, most people didn't know anything about it, which is why I am borrowing my prologue title from an old African-American spiritual: "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."

I don't talk about myself much in my books and public messages. My main purpose is to talk about Jesus. But sometimes

## Prologue

talking about me can help me tell other people about Jesus, and this is one of those times.

In this small book, I tell the stories of men and women from the Bible who were in all kinds of trouble—people such as Isaiah, Elijah, Ruth, and Paul. They were weighed down by guilt and shame, suffered the death of loved ones, had family crises, or went through other painful trials that tested their faith. For some, the trial was absolutely a matter of life and death.

I've called the book *When Trouble Comes*, and what I want to show is how God helped these people. What made the difference for these men and women of true faith? What did they do when trouble came?

I'm interested in this for my own benefit, and also for yours—because I know that you will be in trouble, too. In fact, you may be in trouble right now. Even if nobody knows the trouble you've seen, you are weighed down by guilt and shame, grieving the loss of a relationship, or facing an uncertain future. And if you're not in trouble now, cheer up! You will be, sooner or later. And when this happens, it will help you immensely to know what godly people do when trouble comes.

But before I tell you any stories from the Bible, I want to tell you some of my story, and especially what helped me make it through. I won't tell you all of the reasons why I was in trouble, because some of those reasons are connected to other people's stories, and I need to respect their privacy. But I will tell you what it felt like to be in trouble, and how God rescued me. To borrow a few lines from the English poet and preacher George Herbert, "I live to show his power, who once did bring my joys to weep, and now my griefs to sing."<sup>1</sup>

## The Troubles I've Seen

In a strange way, what happened to me could have been an answer to prayer. Someone very close to me—someone I love more than life itself—was going through a time of real trouble. These troubles came with feelings of such terrifying fear and painful sadness that life no longer seemed worth living. These intense sufferings were far beyond anything I had ever experienced in my own life. So I asked God to lift her burden and, insofar as possible, to let me carry it instead. “Lord, she’s too little,” I said. “She doesn’t understand what’s happening to her. Let me take whatever pain you choose to give. In Jesus’s name.”

Sometimes I wish the Lord *wouldn't* answer my prayers, but this time maybe he did. All I know is that in the weeks and months that followed, while my beloved’s burden gradually lifted, my joy was turned to sorrow.

My day job as the president of Wheaton College has plenty of challenges to begin with. I’m tempted to agree with the scholar from the University of Virginia who studied leadership for higher education and concluded that the American college presidency is “beyond the ability of anyone to do the job.”<sup>2</sup> Balancing the budget, handling delicate personnel matters, caring for students in danger, facing legal accusations, responding to angry letters, trying to raise tens of millions of dollars, making crucial hiring decisions, handling attacks from the media—it’s all in a day’s work. Ordinarily, these are all burdens I can bear without losing too much sleep; otherwise, I couldn’t do the job. And, thankfully, there are lots of other people who help me carry all the burdens every day.

But my beloved’s suffering affected me very deeply. And,

## *Prologue*

in the wise providence of God, I faced other troubles, too— heavy burdens that are too private to share in detail: broken relationships, attacks on my character, painful experiences from the past. It wasn't the best semester for me to go through my 360-degree performance review and get honest feedback (the good, the bad, and the ugly) about my leadership from hundreds of faculty, staff members, alumni, and students.

All of this left me feeling sad and sometimes anxious. There were nights when I had trouble sleeping and mornings when I woke up hours before dawn. It was hard to get up and face the day. There were some mornings when I cried most of the time I was getting ready.

I doubt I was very good company. My problems were taking so much emotional energy that it was hard for me to be with people for very many hours at a time. I remember that on Easter Sunday, of all days, when we had a house full of guests, I needed to go and be alone several times just to make it through the day.

My wife, Lisa, and I went to the doctor, and when the staff ran through their checklist for emotional health, I scored really badly, which was humbling. I began to struggle with whether God loved me or not—another new experience. When I read his promises, I doubted whether I qualified. I would try to take comfort in a verse such as Psalm 86:2, which says, “Preserve my life, for I am godly; save your servant, who trusts in you.” The problem, of course, was that I'm not all that godly to begin with, and I was having trouble trusting the Lord, so I had no guarantee that God would save me.

I could tell that I was in a downward spiral. One day I said to myself: “You know, I understand why people kill themselves.

This is how they feel. It seems like the only way out.” A few days later, I started to wonder how I would end it all, if, you know . . . It wasn’t a thought I wanted to have, but Satan was after me. Give him any little chance and he will take it. Things were moving in a bad direction, and at the rate they were going, how long would it be before I was in real danger?

### **A Normal Part of Life**

Those are some of the troubles I’ve seen—not all of them, by any means, but some of what I experienced one spring. I suppose that now I need to change my title to, “Everybody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.”

What I want to tell you, though, is that God did not abandon me, but rescued me. My loving heavenly Father and my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, together with the helping, comforting Holy Spirit, brought me safely through. I can’t say that my trials are over or that feelings of despair will never return. But I can give the testimony that David gave and say, “The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble” (Ps. 37:39).

Would you like to know some of the things that helped me? The first was this: I knew that what I was going through was totally and completely normal. I can’t ever remember struggling before with serious doubts about God’s love or with feelings of despair. But that is unusual. The bitterness I briefly tasted is something that most Christians go through sooner or later, and that some Christians struggle with for a lifetime.

I know this from the experience of close friends and family members. I also know it from the history of the church. To give

just one example, the great nineteenth-century London preacher Charles Spurgeon struggled with depression over decades of ministry. Preachers he respected told their congregations not to “give way to feelings of depression.” But Spurgeon said: “If those who blame quite so furiously could once know what depression is, they would think it cruel to scatter blame where comfort is needed. There are experiences of the children of God which are full of spiritual darkness; and I am almost persuaded that those of God’s servants who have been most highly favored have, nevertheless, suffered more times of darkness than others.”<sup>3</sup>

We see the same thing in Scripture. Job was tempted to curse God and die. Isaiah was undone. David was downcast. Elijah asked God to take his life. These men were not weak or rebellious; they were simply weighed down by the burdens of life and ministry. Even Jesus went through a dark night of the soul, when he wondered if there was an alternative to the cross, and an afternoon of agony, when he felt forsaken by the Father.

All of this leads me to accept seasons of doubt, discouragement, and depression as a normal part of life in a fallen world. When trouble comes, this does not mean that I am a bad Christian. Nor does it mean that God is against me, although sometimes I may feel that way. In my time of trouble, it helped immensely to know that I was going through something that happens to most of God’s beloved children.

Another thing that helped me was trying to live a normal, everyday life. There were days when this was extremely difficult, but I did it as well as I could. I didn’t have much appetite, but I made sure that I ate something healthy every day.

I pushed myself to get physical exercise, even when I didn’t

have a lot of energy. Praise God for intramural soccer, which helped save my life. Getting regular exercise took my focus off my problems. It strengthened me both physically and emotionally.

I tried to be present with my children: recitals, concerts, baseball games, rides to school, family dinners, bedtime. Some of the memories will stay with me for a lifetime. One of my daughters and I sang hymns and praise songs together in her bedroom when our hearts were both breaking—some of my best worship experiences ever. Another daughter joined me for early morning bird walks in the springtime. I saw God’s beauty in the swallows on the wing, his joy in the warblers singing in the sunshine, his wisdom in the great horned owls brooding in the oak trees. What is more, I was blessed by my daughter’s companionship—her ministry of presence to me.

I went to worship—church on Sundays and college chapel services during the week. I didn’t always feel very much like worshipping—Christians don’t always—but that was another place where God met me. Hymns and songs that expressed God’s grace for my need became especially meaningful, such as these words from the German hymn writer Johann Franck:

Though the earth be shaking,  
ev’ry heart be quaking,  
Jesus calms my fear.  
Lightnings flash and thunders crash;  
yet, though sin and hell assail me,  
Jesus will not fail me.<sup>4</sup>

And, of course, I did my work at Wheaton College five or six days a week. I didn’t quit, but kept up the ordinary routines of daily life: food and drink, work and play, family and worship.

## *Prologue*

All of those things helped, because they are all part of God's design for our flourishing.

### **A Friend's a Friend Forever**

Friends helped me, too, and one of the reasons they were able to help is that I shared what was happening in my life. I didn't share everything with everybody, of course. After all, who would even *want* to know all my troubles? But I told people what I was going through. I talked to my parents. I spoke with some of my closest friends. I shared my struggles with other Christian college presidents. And, of course, every day I talked my trials over with my best friend, the girl from Colorado with whom I fell in love when we were both in college.

Very importantly, I made sure that Wheaton's trustees knew how much pressure I was under. This was important for me, and also for the college. I need to respect the leadership that God has placed over me, which includes not pretending that everything is going well when it isn't. Some of the burdens I was bearing also needed pastoral oversight. So Lisa and I turned to couples in ministry who have known us for a long time and will still love us a long time after we leave Wheaton.

The point is that burdens are never meant to be carried alone. If you are having a problem, please tell a brother or sister you trust and someone who has the responsibility to care for you. This is an important part of healthy life in the body of Christ.

I was helped by small kindnesses, such as the text my son Josh sent me, offering to help me in any way that he could, or the sunshine card the ladies in my office left on my desk.

One afternoon, when I was having despairing thoughts, I

stepped out of a meeting to be alone for a few minutes. In the providence of God, one of my best and oldest friends—Jon Dennis, who is the pastor of Chicago’s Holy Trinity Church—called right then to find out how I was doing. I told him that I was losing the will to live. That in itself helped put things in perspective and loosened the power of self-destructive thoughts.

But what made an even bigger difference is that my friend told me that he loved me. I knew this was true. We had grown up together, and he had always been a faithful friend. But it made a big difference in my life for him to tell me right at that moment that he loved me, which he wouldn’t have done unless he had known how much trouble I was in, which he wouldn’t have known unless I had told him.

My friends also prayed for me, which is another thing that helped, a lot. When trouble comes, nothing helps like the power of prayer.

Many people pray for me all the time, which is humbling. People I don’t even know have a commitment to Wheaton College that calls them to prayer. I get cards and letters from people who tell me they pray for me daily or weekly. Every Thursday, a group of godly women gathers a few blocks from campus to spend a morning in prayer for Wheaton College, which makes a huge difference.

But in my time of trouble, I needed even more prayer, and I also needed to know that people were praying for me. I missed a meeting with my cabinet, and later I learned that they spent an extended time in prayer for my protection. The trustees were praying for me, too, and many of them sent personal notes of encouragement. One night, my mother and father laid their

hands on me. As he prayed, my father mentioned what King Hezekiah did when the Assyrians surrounded Jerusalem and sent a letter that threatened the city's total destruction. Hezekiah took the letter, spread it before the Lord, and prayed that God would save him (2 Kings 19:14–19). In the same way, my father took my troubles and spread them before the Lord in prayer.

All of these prayers helped, but some of the deepest encouragement came from my old college classmates. Most of them knew only some of the troubles I was facing, but that was enough to mobilize them for intercession. My freshman roommate, Steve Snezek, wrote from Montana and told me that he would pray for me. Jimmy Favino, who teaches high school English in Philadelphia, sent me an email to say that he was going to spend the next day in fasting and prayer, just for me. Lisa and I learned that our precious friends the Nussbaums and the Garretts were meeting on Sunday nights to pray for us.

I can hardly express how much it means to me that so many people cared enough about me to pray. I've mentioned some of their names here to honor their friendship, but also to show that when real trouble comes, we need real people to help us. When I was in deep distress, my friends covered me with petitions and benedictions. Their righteous prayers were a powerful instrument of God's grace in my life. And so I wonder: What friend in trouble needs my prayers? And who needs yours?

Meanwhile, I was praying, too. In my prayers, I told God exactly what I was thinking, just like Job did when he was afflicted. Sometimes I didn't know what to ask or couldn't find the

words to form an intelligible petition. I could only say, “Help me, Jesus” or “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Or I could only groan, literally. But the Holy Spirit understands our inner struggles so well that he is able to translate our groanings into prayer. “We do not know what to pray for as we ought,” Scripture says, “but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). Sometimes I wondered what sense the Holy Spirit could make of my anguished soul. I only know that when trouble came, he turned my groans into prayers at the throne of my Father’s grace.

### **The Last Word**

Here is one more thing that helped me: God’s Word, the Bible, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. I treasured the verses that my mother shared with me from the psalms of David: “On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased”; “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life”; “The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever” (Ps. 138:3, 7, 8). Some of my best memories are the times that Lisa and I had in bed late at night, when she would read psalms over me until I fell asleep, quieting my anxious spirit with the true words of God.

One of the main ways that God becomes an ever-present help to us in times of trouble is by speaking his truth to our minds and hearts, which is why I wrote this book. I agree with Spurgeon’s claim that “the worst forms of depression are cured when Holy Scripture is believed.”<sup>5</sup> So I want people to see from Scripture the help that God has for all of us in times of trouble.

## *Prologue*

I know that you will be in trouble, too. It might even happen today. You will suffer the sudden loss of someone you love. You will struggle with a sin that you can't seem to get rid of. You will experience the pain of a broken relationship. There will be problems in your family that no one can fix. You will have to give up one of your dreams. You will wonder how God can provide for your needs. You will have serious doubts about things that always seemed so simple to believe. You will be overwhelmed by the pressures of work or school. You might be tempted to hate yourself, or even to despair of life itself.

What will you do when trouble comes?

The things that helped me will also help you, maybe even more than you know. They are the basic things of life: a good night's sleep, a healthy meal, going to church, talking with a faithful friend, meeting with God through prayer, and meditating on his Word.

The reason these things all help is because they are gifts from our loving Savior, Jesus Christ. When I tell you what helped me in my time of trouble, I am really telling you all the ways that Jesus helped me. Our bodies are the gift of his wisdom and creative power. Whenever we sit down to eat a good meal, we are hosted by his providence. Work is a gift from Jesus, too. Play is another gift, and then afterward a good night of rest. Jesus has given us one another to encourage our souls, especially in corporate worship. He has sent his Spirit to help us pray. Most of all, he has given us life through his death and resurrection. It is all by God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

I don't know what trouble you've seen. But I believe that what David said is true: "The salvation of the righteous is from

the LORD; he is their stronghold in the time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; he . . . saves them, because they take refuge in him” (Ps. 37:39–40). By the grace of God, this is my testimony, in Jesus’s name. And I so very much want it to be your testimony, too.



## “Woe Is Me!”

Isaiah’s Sin and Guilt  
(Isaiah 6:1-8)

It was the year that King Uzziah died, and Isaiah was in trouble. Real trouble. He wasn’t the only one, either. The entire nation of Israel was guilty of grievous sin against a holy God. As a result, the people were about to fall under divine condemnation, Isaiah included. So he cried out and 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!” (Isa. 6:5).

### **Woe to Them!**

To understand how much trouble Isaiah was in, it helps to know that he was a prophet. Therefore, he was the mouthpiece of

God—a man who spoke words of blessing and judgment on behalf of the living God. Some of his words—not a lot, but some—were favorable. Isaiah promised that light would shine out of the darkness, that a virgin would conceive and bear a son, that those who waited on the Lord would rise up like eagles, and that a righteous servant would be crushed for our iniquities and wounded for our transgressions.

Yet many of Isaiah’s words were weighted with the judgment of God. One of the best places to see this is in the chapter that comes right before the passage where Isaiah finds himself in trouble.

Frankly, Isaiah 6 is one of those familiar Bible passages that most Christians don’t know as well as they think they do. Many people know verse 4: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Many also know verse 8, which is one of the great missionary texts in the Bible. It’s the kind of text that often shows up on plaques and T-shirts: “Here am I! Send me!” (NIV). The words are very inspiring. But how many people know the verses that come right before this or the ones that come after?

To understand a text, we have to know the context. And when we turn back to Isaiah 5, we find the prophet pronouncing judgment against the people of God. He talks about a carefully tended vine that would not bear fruit, using it as a metaphor for Israel: God’s people were not producing good spiritual fruit.

So Isaiah said “Woe” to them. Six times! He lamented their unjust affluence: “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field” (Isa. 5:8). He condemned their drunkenness: “Woe to those who . . . run after strong drink, who tarry late

into the evening as wine inflames them!” (v. 11). He criticized their dishonesty: “Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood” (v. 18). He rebuked their moral relativism: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (v. 20). He chastised their intellectual pride: “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes” (v. 21). And he indicted their injustice: “Woe to those who . . . deprive the innocent of his right!” (vv. 22–23).

As we review Isaiah’s lamentable list of woes, we may well wonder what the prophet would say to us. Maybe we would prefer not to know, because most of us do not particularly enjoy having our sins exposed. But in all likelihood, Isaiah would say some of the same things to us that he said to ancient Israel. Woe to us for using our wealth to multiply selfish privilege, for abusing alcohol and other pleasures, for bending the truth to improve our image, or for shrinking the ethical teaching of Scripture to make it fit better with our sinful desires. And woe to us for thinking that Isaiah 5 is mainly for someone else—someone we hope will finally listen—rather than realizing that God is speaking to us. We should not be “wise in our own eyes,” as Isaiah describes it, but admit that we, too, do not have it all together spiritually yet.

### **Woe Is Me!**

This brings us to one of the most remarkable aspects of this passage. As noted above, Isaiah pronounces six woes in chapter 5: “Woe to this person,” “Woe to that person,” and “Woe to those people over there.” To make his prophecy complete, we might expect him to pronounce a seventh woe. After all, seven is the biblical number that makes things complete.

And, in fact, Isaiah *does* pronounce a seventh woe! It is the famous woe in chapter 6, verse 5: “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.” Isaiah could not simply go around saying “Woe to you” all the time. He could not simply set everyone else straight and comment on everyone else’s sin without ever confessing his own. No, in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah came to a point of total honesty about the fact that he was as big a sinner as everyone else—maybe bigger.

Amazingly, Isaiah did this in the one area of life that he had most completely surrendered to God. If people in Israel had asked, “Is there anyone we can count on to tell the truth?” the answer would have been, “Isaiah the prophet.” In fact, the man probably would have said it himself. “There are other areas of life where I struggle,” Isaiah might have said, “but if there is one part of my body that is totally dedicated to God, it is my mouth.” The man was a prophet, after all, which meant that he was a spokesperson for God.

But then Isaiah realized that he was a foul-mouthed sinner, too. Suddenly it occurred to him that *he* was a man who used bad language, who employed his rhetorical skill to get people to do what he wanted, who said something critical when he could have said something beneficial. And at the very moment the prophet recognized this, he said: “Woe is me! I am utterly undone, because I have discovered that my mouth is just as filthy as anyone else’s.”

Isaiah’s confession is a good word for anyone who makes critical comments, which includes most of us. This is always a temptation at work, in church, on a college campus, in a family,

and pretty much everywhere else. When critical thinking is not consecrated by humility, it becomes a critical spirit. So we become critical of others’ performance, background, style, or sense of humor. We condemn the way they think, what they say, and the choices they make. There is always someone to criticize—someone who doesn’t have it together the way we do. Most of us will keep on criticizing until God saves us the way he saved Isaiah: by showing us that our attitude is a much bigger problem than whatever we think is wrong with everyone else.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn came to a similar place of recognition in *The Gulag Archipelago*, his famous exposé of the evils of the Soviet Union. The Nobel laureate anticipated that some readers would expect him to draw a clear and simple distinction between the good people and the evil people. Solzhenitsyn replied: “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being . . .”<sup>1</sup>

It was not wrong for Isaiah to pronounce God’s judgment. He was a prophet, so that was his job. But his biggest issue was his own sin. There was not one single area of his life that he could say was perfect—not even the areas that he tried the hardest to offer to God. So before he could go out and do what God was calling him to do, Isaiah had to come clean and say, “Woe is me!”

The astronomer Johannes Kepler also expressed conviction and confession. Kepler had long dedicated the best of his intellectual powers to the exploration of the universe. He had done so with the explicit purpose of bringing glory to God. But even

his calling as a scientist came with unavoidable temptations. So Kepler offered this marvelous prayer:

If I have been enticed into brashness  
by the wonderful beauty of thy works,  
or if I have loved my own glory among men,  
while advancing in work destined for thy glory,  
gently and mercifully pardon me:  
and finally,  
deign graciously to cause that these demonstrations  
may lead to thy glory and to the salvation of souls,  
and nowhere be an obstacle to that.  
Amen.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth asking: “What sin do I need to confess?” Answering truthfully may be the first step toward your salvation. Perhaps you need to say, “Woe is me, for I am the person who likes people to think more highly of me than they should.” “Woe is me, for I am the person who tears people down instead of building them up.” “Woe is me, for I have firm moral convictions in some areas, but I like to make exceptions when I would rather do my own thing.” Or “Woe is me, for I am as sinful as Isaiah was, if not worse.”

### **Totally Awesome!**

To fully appreciate how much trouble Isaiah was in, we also need to know what he was seeing at that moment. Here we come to some of the most awe-inspiring verses in the entire Bible:

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. 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. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. (Isa. 6:1–4)

Everything about this scene is totally awesome. God is awesome. Here we see Isaiah’s vision of Almighty God—specifically, God the Son. We know this because when John referred to Isaiah’s ministry, he said that the prophet saw the glory of Jesus Christ (John 12:41). Isaiah saw the awesomeness of God in the person of his only Son.

The prophet also saw God’s throne, which is just as awesome. I know thrones are awesome because when students participate in chapel worship at Wheaton College, they hesitate to sit in the big chair. People leading worship at Wheaton sit in large, fairly ornate chairs on the stage of Edman Chapel. I call them “the Narnia chairs” because they look like the thrones from Cair Paravel, the magnificent castle in the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis. For some reason, people always seem to be in awe of the big chair; they know it’s not for them. So imagine what Isaiah felt when he went into the throne room of heaven and saw God’s throne “high and lifted up.” Jesus Christ sits on the highest of all thrones. He is elevated and exalted.

His robe is equally awesome. Isaiah saw its train fill the temple. Think of a bride on her wedding day, with her beautiful dress trailing down the aisle. Now imagine her bridal train filling the aisle, spilling out into the church, pressing up against

the walls, and piling up towards the ceiling. When Isaiah saw the train of the robe of the Lord who sits on the throne of God, it filled the temple. That's awesome!

God's angels are awesome, and Isaiah saw them as well—the mighty seraphim. These majestic six-winged beings—which we would be tempted to worship the moment we saw them—are so overwhelmed by the greater holiness of God that they cover themselves: two wings over their faces and two wings over their feet. And with their other two wings, they hover in the holy presence of God.

What these angels say is awesome as well: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Repetition is the Bible's way of adding exclamation marks. So when the angels repeat the word *holy*, and then repeat it again, they are testifying to the absolutely perfect, totally pristine holiness of God, bearing witness to the holiness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah heard an awesome sound—voices so mighty that they shook the foundations of heaven. There were awesome smells, too, because the house of God was filled with smoke. This was a total sensory experience of the awesomeness of God.

Here is something else that is absolutely awesome: everything that Isaiah experienced is happening right now in the throne room of the universe. We know this because when the doors of heaven were opened for the apostle John, as recorded in his famous Revelation, he saw living creatures worshiping God the Son. “Each of them [has] six wings,” John tells us, “and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’” (Rev. 4:8).

Sound familiar? This is the same thing that Isaiah heard, because it is what the seraphim are always saying, which is totally awesome! Apparently, there are angels whose eternal employment is to worship God in all of his holiness. They have been doing this since the day they were created. They are doing it now, and they will do it forever—thereby offering God an infinity of holy praise.

### **The Morality Gap**

Can we even imagine what it was like for Isaiah to experience this? Even if we can't, we can see how much trouble he was in. Isaiah 6 is the juxtaposition of two absolute extremes. Two things were coming together: the awesome holiness of God and the woeful guiltiness of his prophet. Nothing is holier than the triune God, and nothing is unholier than the lips of a man who has been going around telling everyone else how unholy they are without confessing his own sin.

When he stood in that throne room and realized that he was caught in the middle, Isaiah was completely undone, totally shattered, absolutely broken, and utterly ruined. All he could say was: “Woe is me! For I am lost.”

It is wise for each of us to consider whether we have come to a similar place in our own lives, making a complete confession and admitting without reservation that we are sinners in the sight of God. Isaiah's trouble was not just this sin or that sin; it was his very identity as a sinner. He would never be holy enough for God. Anyone who catches even one glimpse of God's true holiness knows immediately that he or she is in deadly peril.

So let me ask: Have you ever been where Isaiah was when he found himself woefully lost? Have you seen enough of the holiness of God to know that you are a guilty sinner? It's not just the bad things we did that we still feel guilty about; the bad things we do that we can't stop doing; or all the good things we should do but don't. No, it's the trouble we're in as the sinners we are.

### **Our Part: Confessing Our Sins**

So what should we do when we're in this kind of trouble? What can be done about our most basic problem, which is sin and guilt?

The first thing to do, of course, is to admit it, which is what Isaiah did. He didn't try to defend himself. He didn't come up with a lot of excuses. He didn't say, "Lord, I know I'm a sinner, but I just want to point out that there are some other people around here who break your covenant a lot more than I do." He didn't try to claim that his good deeds outnumbered his bad deeds or that he always had good intentions, even if he failed to live up to them. No, once he could see the massive canyon that separated him from the pristine holiness of God, he confessed his sin.

Furthermore, he confessed his sin in the one area of life where he had always prided himself on being particularly righteous. As a prophet, he had dedicated his life to speaking the pure words of God. But even there he fell short. So he said, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5).

Isaiah's example should prompt us to identify the areas of life where we pride ourselves on giving everything to God. Whatever it is—whether it is sports, music, academics, or ministry—there

is not one single part of us that is perfectly protected from the stain of sin.

I could give lots of examples from my own life, but here is just one. Some years ago, I was meeting with the interns in our church—young people preparing for ministry—and I shared a list of sins that are particularly tempting for pastors. As I read down the list, I said to myself, “Yeah, these sins are all really tempting for me, too, except maybe that one.” The sin that I thought wasn’t so tempting for me was cynicism.

I’m an optimist; I try to see the best in everything. So I don’t think of myself as a cynic. But guess which sin I’ve been most convicted of since that night with my interns? Spiritual cynicism. It’s tempting for me to criticize a Christian experience that seems shallow to me or that I think people get more excited about than they should.

So here is a challenge for every Christian: take one area of life that you have pretty well dedicated to God and ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of sin right there. It won’t take long. Soon you will see that you’re in trouble there, too. We’re in trouble with sin everywhere. But knowing this is part of God’s grace to us, because it gives us a chance to repent. Hopefully, we will do this the way that Isaiah did, when he freely confessed that he was a sinner to the very core. We will say: “O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble” (Isa. 33:2).

### **God’s Part: Atoning for Sin**

Really, this was the only thing that Isaiah *could* do: confess his sin. Likewise, there is nothing more we can do to solve the great

trouble of our guilt than simply to admit our sin. But there is more that God can do, and he does it!

As soon as Isaiah confessed his sin, “one of the seraphim” flew to him. “In his hand” he had “a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.” The angel pressed that blazing ember against Isaiah’s lips and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (Isa. 6:6–7).

These verses teach us many things about the forgiveness of sin. They teach us that we do not need to wait for God to forgive us; we are forgiven the very moment we repent. When we feel guilty about our sins, we should not delay. Instead, we should run straight to God and make a full confession. God is gracious to forgive. Although he knew how much trouble Isaiah was in—what a woeful sinner he was—he did not destroy him; he saved him! Whatever the sin, when we confess it, God’s mercy flies to us the way the angel flew to Isaiah.

This mercy, this forgiveness, is for each and every sin, which is something else we learn from these verses. God offers specific forgiveness for particular sins. In touching the coal to Isaiah’s mouth, the seraph dealt precisely with the sin that the prophet had confessed: unclean lips. It must have been excruciating. Notice that the seraph had to use tongs to pick up the coal. What the angel did with the coal was painful but effective, because Isaiah’s sin was totally purged. His full confession was followed by complete cleansing.

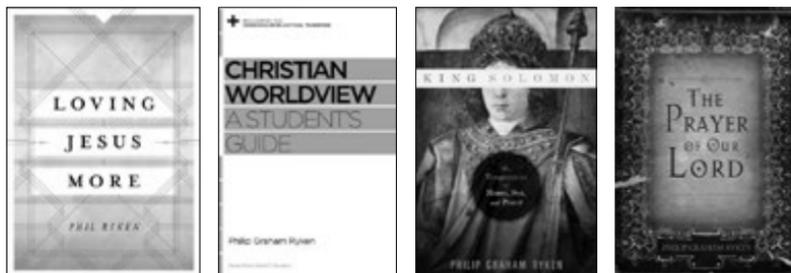
These verses also tell us that forgiveness is offered on the basis of blood. Notice that the seraph’s burning coal came from the altar where sacrifices were made for sin. This is why Isaiah’s

guilt was taken away and his sin atoned for: a lamb was slain, blood was spilt, a judgment fire was lit, and then, as a result, Isaiah’s troubles were over.

Praise God: all of this grace is available to us in Jesus Christ. When we are in trouble because we are guilty (not if, but when), there is a way for us to be saved. The moment we confess our sins, God flies to us with his forgiveness. The Holy Spirit takes the atonement that Jesus accomplished and applies it directly to our sin. Pride, jealousy, lust, greed, theft, dishonesty, prejudice—Jesus dealt with all of our troubling sins on the cross.

Because of the cross, we no longer need to say, “Woe is me!” Instead, we can say, “Thank you, Jesus.” Then and only then will we be ready to say what Isaiah said next: “Here I am! Send me.”

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