

How an Encounter With Jesus Changes Everything

When we confront the awful truth about our sin, we will see with new eyes the Savior who reaches down to lift us up.

In my travels, there have been many times when I was unaware that a notable person was nearby. Were it not for my observant traveling companion, well-known people such as Paul McCartney, Dick Morris, Richard Thomas, Prince, David Gergen, Cokie Roberts, Charlie Gibson and many others would have all passed by unnoticed.

However, I'd usually receive a little nudge and whisper, "Anne, don't look now, but so-and-so is here. Right over there." And when I'd look "right over there," I'd see a very ordinary person. No glitz or glamour, no neon lights or fancy get-up—just another weary traveler struggling with the luggage and trying to get comfortable in a seat that's too small.

Somehow, seeing a famous celebrity in an ordinary setting is just, well, not that exciting. I wonder...would it be possible to see Jesus and not know it? As wildly implausible as it might seem—it is possible. Like Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb on Easter morning, you and I may see Him yet not recognize Him.

Sometimes we need help. We need someone to nudge us and whisper, "Look, He's here. Right over there." And then, when we see Him for who He is, the experience may not be what we expected.

A Change of Focus

One reason I've been unaware, at times, that I was seeing Jesus was because the moment wasn't what I thought it would be. I thought that seeing Him would send me into a kind of

spiritual orbit. I thought it would result in a glorious, exhilarating, out-of-body ecstatic experience. Yet, within seconds, the thrill of a fresh encounter with Jesus morphed from the heights of joy to the depths of depression.

The depression, then, seemed to call into question the validity of the encounter. How could meeting Jesus make me feel so miserable and helpless? The prophet Isaiah's testimony, recorded in Isaiah 6, taught me that having an encounter with Jesus isn't necessarily an occasion of ecstasy. In the year before Isaiah saw the Lord, he'd passionately preached a message to the people in his changing world, exhorting them to repent, saying: "Woe to you...Woe to you...Woe to you!" (See Is. 5:1-30.)

Isaiah was preaching his heart out and pointing his finger at the sin he saw in his collapsing culture. He was preaching God's truth! Often when I watch the evening news or read the morning paper, I also have an overwhelming desire to point my finger and thunder, "Woe to you, woe to you, woe to you!" My focus is entirely on their sin!

Before he saw the Lord, Isaiah was totally focused on their sin too. But upon seeing the Lord, his eyes were opened—not only to a fresh vision of the Lord—but also to a fresh vision of himself.

Then Isaiah wailed, "Woe to me!" (See Is. 6:1-5.) He wasn't ecstatic. He wasn't transported to heights of glory. He wasn't uplifted to an exalted spiritual plateau. He was plunged into a state of spiritual helplessness and depression.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he felt dirty, sinful, wretched, guilty, worthless and ashamed. Flooded by the light of holiness and purity that emanates from the Lord, he had nowhere to hide and no one to blame. It was then that Isaiah knew he wasn't a victim; he was a sinner.

The Ugly Truth

Think back over your life. When have you felt the acute weight and unshakable burden of your sin? When have you felt so spiritually poor and blind and naked and utterly helpless that you even despaired of life?

Could it be, Dear One, that that was your encounter with the spotless, sinless Son of God? Could it be that—because your sin becomes glaringly apparent in the searing light of His holiness—the nearer to Him you actually are, the closer to hell you actually feel?

To his credit, Isaiah didn't shut his eyes or deafen his ears or whine about what somebody else did or didn't do. He didn't run away from the blinding light. Isaiah, in soul-stripping, brutal honesty, sobbed: "I am ruined!" This was no shallow, superficial, hypocritical show of spirituality. This was the cry of a man whose heart had been broken in two.

This kind of utter spiritual ruination is almost foreign to our modern-day mind. So much of our focus seems to be on building up our self-esteem and thinking positively. We're repulsed by even the thought of being so totally helpless in our sinful condition.

We don't want to acknowledge that we're spiritually hopeless, without a remote possibility of ever pleasing God. Our condition makes us forever unacceptable in His presence and unwelcome in His heavenly home.

How is it that, like Isaiah, we can be so offended and preoccupied with the sin of others while we're completely oblivious to the sin in our own lives? I wonder if this is one reason the world seems to view the church as a haven for hypocrites. While the unsaved may be somewhat aware of their own sins—those for which we condemn them—they also see our sins, which we ignore.

With a face that must have burned crimson from shame, Isaiah

burst into a startled confession, “‘I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty’” (Is. 6:5, NIV).

In other words, “I’m no better than the people at whom I’ve been pointing my finger!” That wasn’t just a humbling admission; it was a humiliating confession.

As I studied the first five chapters of Isaiah’s book, his sins were not readily obvious to me. If he set his standards by looking around at others, then, in comparison, he might have felt quite confident. But when his life was measured by standards of perfect holiness, the revelation of sin was devastating!

Again and again, as I stand to publicly proclaim God’s Word, in my spirit I’m on my face before God with a dreadful fear. I’m acutely aware that I’m a sinner—no better than those who look back at me with attentive, upturned faces. But when I began my ministry, I lacked a Spirit-sensitized awareness of my own sinfulness.

I remember being so spiritually superficial that when a speaker challenged those in the audience, including myself, to spend a few moments in confession of sin, I couldn’t think of even one sin in my life to confess! But then I came across James 2:10, which issues this indictment: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” All of it? All of it!

I thought of all the moments of all the days of all the weeks of all the months of all the years in my life when I’d broken the greatest commandment—the one that directs me to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. Since I was easily guilty of this sin, I was guilty of all sin. In my life, just one moment of not loving God with all my heart is enough to clinch the verdict that I’m a sinner.

As I meditate on what sin is—asking God to give me eyes to see

myself in the light of who He is—the sin in my life becomes a nightmare of guilt that tears my heart, leaving me totally helpless and hopeless. And I'm in ministry! The thought is appalling!

How can I instruct others when I'm responsible for—and ruined by—sin? The turmoil in my heart and mind, brought on by repeated failure, wrenches from my lips an echo of Isaiah's outburst, "Woe to me!" The pain is unbearable. The grief is all-consuming.

When my heart is rent and I acknowledge what I've done, I can so easily dissolve into utter self-pity and absolute despair. But praise God! Praise God! The very same thing that God used to save Isaiah, He's used to save me—and He can use it to save you from emotional, spiritual and eternal misery.

From Pain to Purity

Just when Isaiah was spiraling into the dark night of despair...just when he surely thought he'd plummeted as far into the pit of abandonment as anyone could go...things got even worse: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth" (Is. 6:6-7).

As the live coal was pressed to Isaiah's lips, the searing pain must have been agonizing. But painful blisters would lead to the joy of sins forgiven. For even as his lips were seared, the angel's words must have felt like a soothing balm to Isaiah's tortured soul: "'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for'" (Is. 6:7).

From that moment on, Isaiah's life was never the same. I expect that with his lips, now purified by holy fire, he never again talked, thought, or lived the same way. Praise God! There's hope for ruined sinners like Isaiah! For me! And for you! The hope is found, not in a burning coal of fire, but in what it represents—the blood of Jesus, shed on the altar of

the cross and applied to every area of our lives—mind, spirit, soul and body.

My own searing conviction and confession of sin have left me feeling desperate for cleansing. I've longed to hear the same words of reassurance Isaiah heard. And I have: "Anne, the blood of Jesus, My Son, purifies you from every sin—past, present and even future sin. Because you have confessed your sin, I will be faithful and just to forgive you and purify you from all unrighteousness. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you." Thank God for the blood of Jesus that hasn't lost its power to cleanse us of our sin. All of it!

As Isaiah bowed in the flickering light of the burning coals, having repented of his sin and returned to the cross, his heart must have started to beat in sync with that same divine rhythm. His entire being also must have been wholly captivated by the compelling desire to serve the One whose grace and mercy had been extended to him at the altar. And in that moment, Isaiah knew his life would never be the same. A genuine experience of personal revival that results from a fresh encounter with Jesus is not a fleeting thing. It's not just educational—or inspirational—or motivational—or emotional. It's life-changing.

It truly is like waking up in our personal relationship with God so that now our lives entirely revolve around our passionate love for Jesus. You'll know your heart's been set aflame by the fire of revival when nothing else matters to you as much as your love for Him.

Read a companion devotional

Anne Graham Lotz is the second daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, founder of Angel Ministries, and the author of several books.