Maranatha Baptist Bible College

THE PARADOX OF ISAIAH 6:9-10

A Report

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BIPA 430 Isaiah

by

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“Seminaries should train their students to preach sermons that will cause their listeners to become spiritually numb.” If one was to make such a claim, he would most assuredly be ridiculed, disregarded, and considered as absolutely ridiculous. However, a similar concept seems to exist in the words of Isaiah 6:9-10. In this passage God commands Isaiah to preach a message in order that the recipients of the message might be hardened. Should this be taken literally? Is something missing that would clarify these verses? How can one explain this? Some attempt to handle these verses by discarding or explaining away their paradoxical nature all together. However, in light of various sound explanations that will be presented, the apparent paradox in Isaiah 6:9-10 should be taken seriously.

Overview of Isaiah 6 and Verses 9 and 10

Isaiah chapter 6 in the simplest terms is Isaiah’s vision of the Lord and commission to prophesy. In this text of scripture, Isaiah witnesses the great Adonai sitting on His throne in all His splendor (1). Seraphs are all about Him worshiping in reverence and singing, “Holy, holy, holy” (2-3). Having seen the holiness of God with his very eyes, Isaiah, a sinner amidst a generation of sinners, is confronted with his uncleanness and cries, “Woe is me!” (5). But in His sovereign grace, Adonai cleanses Isaiah and prepares Him for service (6-7).1 Having graciously cleansed Isaiah, God asks a question: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (8). And

Isaiah, without knowing what he is volunteering to do, immediately responds that he is willing (8). Verses 9-13 then presents Isaiah’s commission from God. Verses 9 and 10, specifically, form the message given by God to Isaiah for him to preach to the people of Judah.

Verse 9 contains the content of this message given to Isaiah by God and verse 10 presents the purpose of the message, both seemingly paradoxical. The message Isaiah is commissioned to give is to the people is a command to keep hearing but not to understand and to keep seeing but not to perceive. Many commentators understand the grammatical construction of these verbs, two imperatives (‘hear’ and ‘see’) plus two infinitive absolutes (‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’), as functioning in an adverbial manner to intensify the thought (i.e., indeed hear) while others understand the construction as connoting the idea of continuation (i.e., “hear continually”).

As stated, the content of Isaiah’s message is a paradox. How can one perceive and yet not perceive in the same vein? This apparent contradiction is even stronger for the Hebrew mind which, for example, understood “hearing” as representing an acknowledgment accompanied by a response. This message of truth is a light so bright that those who see it will be blinded and therefore not able to see it as if the message itself is placing a veil over their eyes. In other


5. Young, The Book of Isaiah, 257.
words, the people will certainly see, but they will not see as they ought; they will see, but the result will not be positive. In this sense, the preaching will be the means of further hardening.

Verse 10, in like manner, states the apparent paradoxical purpose for the paradoxical message of verse 9 in a chiastic structure. In Hebrew thought, the eyes and ears related to the outward means of perception while the heart, being the center of understanding and the entire man, relates to the result of these perceptions. Likewise, a “fat heart” speaks of a slow, languid, self-oriented set of responses, incapable of decisive, self-sacrificial action (cf. Deut 32:15; Jer 5:21, 28; Ps. 119:70). In other words, a natural, plain understanding of verse 10 leads to the conclusion that the purpose of this message (10) is to prevent the people from perceiving, lest they repent and consequently be healed.

**Attempts to Rid Isaiah 6:9-10 of Its Paradoxical Nature**

Having understood the basic thrust of these verses, one is confronted with what he is to do with the apparent paradox. Certainly some might claim no paradox exists and that to see these verses as saying God’s purpose was to harden these peoples’ hearts is to misunderstand the text. Some interpreters explain away the apparent paradox by taking the imperatives as futures tense verbs (i.e., “you will keep on hearing but not understand”), making these verses simply a

6. The chiasm of verse 10:
A - To make the people’s hearts dull (or fat).
B - To make the people’s ears heavy.
C - To make the people’s eyes blind.
c - So that the people might not see with their eyes.
b - So that the people might not hear with their ears.
a - So that the people might not understand with their hearts.

prediction. But even if this rewording is acceptable, which it is not (see below), the paradoxical nature is still somewhat present in that God is commissioning a message knowing full well its future negative results. Such an explanation does not take into account the fact that

Isaiah is commanded to preach in such a manner that a particular result [rejection] will be the consequence. Now, if God foresees that such a particular result will be the consequence, it is clear that that particular result is certain and that is has already been determined by God. From this conclusion there is no escape.

Others try to discard the paradoxical aspect by making these statements into questions (i.e., “but how will you understand?”). But as Steveson notes, “the repetition of the verbs, the omission of the interrogative particle, and the NT use all argue against this.”

The LXX takes what in the Hebrew text appears as God’s hardening to mean the people harden their own hearts. The Targum rendering tries to imply that blindness was a prior condition, not a result of the message being proclaimed and possibly tries to make the hardening conditional upon Judah’s potential repentance. And finally, the Qumran manuscript 1QIṣa even more dramatically rewords the text so that the message is an encouragement for people to listen and understand, the exact opposite of what the Hebrew text states. Such explanations and manipulations of the Hebrew text, however, do not seriously regard the natural reading that the prophetic word is a causal factor resulting in hardened hearts. “The proclamation in some sense

9. Ibid., 259.
13. Ibid., 47.
produces the effect is predicts.”\textsuperscript{14} In conclusion, as noted above, the grammatical construction of these verbs disallow such means of explaining away the paradox.

On the same note, in recent times some have concluded that verses 9-13 are not actually apart of Isaiah’s original experience of having a vision of God and being commissioned by Him, but that these words were added by Isaiah after some reflection upon his proceeding unsuccessful preaching. This view stems from an invalid hyper contextual connection between chapters 6 and chapters 7 and 8\textsuperscript{15} and is reading more into Isaiah 6:9-10 than would be understood from a natural reading of the text. Further, the fact that Isaiah asks how long he is to preach this message (11) reveals that Isaiah’s preaching of this message was yet future in the context of Isaiah chapter 6.

\textbf{The Proper Understanding of the Paradox}

As shown, discarding the paradoxical nature of these verses results in a faulty interpretation and an improper handling of the text. Therefore, one must admit the existence of the paradox in order to take these verses seriously as well as honestly. However, this is not to say valid explanations of the paradox are nonexistent. Such explanations are soon to be presented. Yet it must be understand that such explanations are not at all attempts to explain away the paradox, but to understand the message of verses 9-10 while fully recognizing the paradox’s existence.

\textsuperscript{14} Oswalt, \textit{The Book of Isaiah}, 188.

Recognition of the paradox

First, admitting the existence of the paradox is not to say that God was giving Isaiah a defected message. The nation’s response is its own responsibility and its rejection is yet ascribed to its own depravity. But since true spiritual perception is a gift of God, why would God not grant this perception to His people rather than leave them to be hardened? This message appears even stranger in light of the book of Isaiah as a whole, where Isaiah often proclaims the coming Messiah and His kingdom. However, this paradox is not unique to Isaiah 6:9-10. It exists in every passage pertaining to God’s sovereignty (specifically God’s sovereign elective work, cf. Rom 9) in revealing truth to whomever He chooses or with God’s general call to all but effectual call/drawing of the elect (Mt 22:14).

Explanation of the paradox

First, attempts to discard the paradox seem to indicate one does not believe a judgmental aspect is appropriate in God’s commissioned message. However, one ought not to be surprised that such impending, unavoidable doom is spoken of in 6:9-10, for similar language appears throughout the entire book of Isaiah.


17. See Mt 13:10-15; Mk 4:10-12; and Lk 8:9-10 which also all cite Isaiah 6:9-10.

18. The paradoxical message of verses 9-10 on the backdrop of Isaiah’s cleansing in verses 5-7 reveals a beautiful example of God’s sovereign grace—God leaves and confirms the masses in the hardness of their hearts while at the same time reaching out to cleanse Isaiah, a man of unclean lips no different than the other men of his nation (5), despite any sign that Isaiah sought his own cleansing.

Second, that Judah had already proven themselves as rebellious is significant. In other words, God is not directly hardening their hearts arbitrarily but is confirming them in their rebellion by hardening their hearts.\(^20\) It was as if the people of Judah were assisting God’s purpose of hardening them at the very moment God gave this message to Isaiah. As G.K. Beale says, “This is not God’s planning in advance to make Israel sin; instead, it is his confirming them in their repeated, freely chosen decisions to reject him (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28).”\(^21\)

However, one could take this explanation too far by stripping God of any action. As noted above and as will be expounded below, God’s purpose is clearly presented in these verses as being to harden His people’s hearts. Therefore, to \textit{simply} say that these verses ought to be understood as man’s act of hardening himself is to revert to the same false explanations as noted above (i.e., the LXX’s rendering of the text). So then, how should one accurately understand God’s active participation in this hardening of His people?

Smith rightly suggests that the core focus of this passage is not that God does not want his people to repent and be healed. Surely God does. The content and result of \textit{this} message, however, is that the \textit{time of repentance} has now passed and the \textit{time of judgment} has no arrived.\(^22\) In other words, the people of Judah several times have failed to respond to God when He called for them to repent, leaving God entirely justified in punishing them at this point.\(^23\)

If one were to compare this to a parent punishing a disobedient child, one would say that once the stubborn child is over the knee and the hand is swinging, it is too late to offer

\(^{20}\) 2 Kings 16; 2 Chronicles 28, and Isaiah 2-5 reveal that the hardening of these people’s hearts occurred far in advance to this message was ever proclaimed.

\(^{21}\) Beale and Carson, \textit{The NT Use of the OT}, 46-47.


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 195.
repentance to avoid punishment. If the child refuses to repent or admit his guilt, it is not unfair or unethical to bring punishment at some point.\textsuperscript{24} Such an explanation perfectly complements and accords with the explanation in the above paragraph.

Further, the paradoxical nature of verses 9 and 10 can be understood properly in light of God’s concern to be faithful to the truth. The fact that God commissions Isaiah with a message that He knows the people will reject reveals God’s concern is the content of His servants’ messages and not necessary what could be positive results. Certainly Isaiah could have preached a message that would have found favor with his audience and resulted in a positive response. But in doing so, Isaiah would not have presented the truth. The truth, on the other hand, is exactly what depraved men are inclined to reject. But God simply will not compromise His truth. This is one reason why Isaiah is commissioned to preach this paradoxical message—because God knows His truth will not bring repentance, but only further hardening of the people. Therefore, Isaiah’s commission was to be faithful to the truth at the expense of not appearing successful.\textsuperscript{25}

Further, the reason God sent Isaiah with a message that would only confirm the people’s hardness of hearts may have been for the ultimate purpose of restoration. In other words, to bring His people to restoration, God could have either 1) compromised His truth in order to present a message the people would have accepted, or 2) presented His truth so that the people might reject it. The former is not restorative, for it would only provide a false cleansing based on compromised truth. If any other message claimed to bring healing, it would be mere mockery.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 195.

\textsuperscript{25} Young, \textit{The Book of Isaiah}, 190.
“for what can heal except God’s truth?” Therefore, God would never have chosen option one, for the sake of His truth and His people. The latter option would lead to punishment and exile, ultimately resulting in a faithful remnant (13) and eventually the majority of the people turning back to God (i.e., Isaiah 49:8-26). In summary, the preaching of this apparent paradoxical message is therefore not vindictive or contradictory to what is seen throughout much of the book of Isaiah to be God’s desire to see his people healed, but has the purpose of restoration as its heart.

In view of above explanations and their validity, the paradoxical nature of the message in Isaiah 6:9-10 should be understood in its literal, plain, and natural sense. Various attempts to do away with the paradox have been shown to be faulty, invalid ways of handling the text. On the other hand, understanding the paradox by means of an assortment of sound clarifications—impending judgment is a reoccurring and understandable theme throughout Isaiah, the people of Judah had already choose to rebel against God and with the emergence of this message the time for their repentance had passed, truth is more important to God than vain response, and in hardening the people’s hearts God’s purpose was ultimately restorative—allows one to treat the passage with honesty.

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26. Ibid., 198.

27. Oswalt, Isaiah, 128.

28. The fact that Isaiah’s preaching will not prohibit the few repentant individuals from responding positively to God shows that God’s purpose in commissioning Isaiah to preach this message was not vindictive.


