

Great news for those in spiritual need

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The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.

(Isaiah 61.1 – 3)

Introduction

These words were read out by Jesus in the synagogue of his home town at the beginning of his ministry, and he said after having read them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4.21). Clearly his choice of Scripture was highly significant. What he was doing was that he was saying, in effect, "This is my manifesto. This is what I am going to do in people's lives. This is what you can expect from me."

The words were read out nearly 2000 years ago, but what Jesus did during his ministry while he was on earth, he is doing today. He died on the Cross, was raised from the dead, and is now reigning in heaven. From there he has poured out the Holy Spirit, who is continuing the work which Jesus began in people's lives.

You will see that this quotation from Isaiah speaks about what Jesus will do for those in need: the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners, those who mourn, and so on. Jesus promises that he will more than satisfy their needs, that he will bring them out of their situation of great misery and despair, and give them deliverance, joy and peace.

So here is a message of great news for you if you are aware of great needs in your life, particularly great spiritual needs. If you are keenly aware of weakness and failings in your life, then take heart! Jesus promises to completely transform your life by his power working in you.

As we think about this passage together, I believe we can divide it into three main sections:

What Jesus promises for those in need (verse 1)

How he will fulfil his promise (verse 2)

The results of Jesus' work in our lives (verse 3).

1. What Jesus promises for those in need

Let us first of all consider what it is that Jesus will do for those in need. We see these things in verse 1 of this passage.

1) Good news for the poor

Isaiah prophesies that Jesus will know the anointing of the Spirit of God to preach good news to the poor. Who are the poor to whom this message is proclaimed? It is those who are

spiritually poor, those who know that they have nothing that they can present to God. Jesus said on another occasion "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.3). If you know you are poor spiritually – that you have no good deeds you can point to that will make you acceptable to God, that your love for God is very inadequate, that your spiritual life is very weak – if you know that you are spiritually poor then Jesus has good news for you. What is this good news? The good news is that God will credit you with riches that you yourself do not have. He will make you a spiritual millionaire. He will credit to your spiritual bank account a righteousness, a goodness, that is not your own, the righteousness of Christ. He will treat you as though you were 100% perfect, just as Christ is 100% perfect.

2) Healing for the broken-hearted

The next thing that is promised is that Jesus will bind up the broken-hearted. Who are these "broken-hearted" whose wounded hearts will be healed? It is those who are in deep distress over their sin. When the Holy Spirit works in someone's life, he convicts him of sin. Things which before had not troubled him, and that he had justified to himself, saying "everyone does that sort of thing" now cause him deep distress. He can see the ruin that has been brought into his life on account of his wrongdoing. He can see how others have been badly affected. Worst of all, he is painfully aware that he has offended against the God of Heaven, the Almighty and Eternal God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the Sovereign Lord of all men. He can see that a sin against the Eternal God deserves eternal punishment in Hell. He knows that God would be completely right and just to punish him with Hell. The one thing he finds surprising is that he has not already been sent to Hell.

Are you broken-hearted for your sin? Does your sin cause you deep distress and anxiety? Do you loathe the things which you have done which have broken God's commandments? When you remember your sins do you have a stabbing pain in your heart? If so, then Jesus promises to heal your broken heart. How? By extending to you complete and utter forgiveness for everything you ever have done wrong, and everything you ever will do wrong.

3) Freedom for the captives

The next thing this passage says that Jesus will proclaim is "freedom for the captives." Who are the captives who will know the freedom that Jesus brings? Those who are captives of sin, and come for him to be set free. The truth is that all of us are slaves of sin. We are born with the tendency to sin built into us, on account of the original sin of our ancestor Adam. As we grow up that tendency to sin very quickly starts to manifest itself, so even as very young children we behave in selfish and wrong ways. And we cannot stop ourselves. Jesus said "everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8.38). We have all sinned. Therefore, in our natural state, we are all slaves to sin.

But Jesus promises freedom for the captives. Freedom from this tyranny of sin. How? Through the miracle of the rebirth. In our natural state we do not want to please God. We have cold stony hearts as far as loving and serving God is concerned. All we want to do is to live for ourselves and for our sin. But God promises that he will take away our stony hearts and replace them with hearts of flesh which love him and his commandments. "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. They will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." (Ezekiel 11.19 – 20). No longer will we be helpless miserable slaves of sin, but now we shall have both the desire to do what is right, and the

power to do so, through the Holy Spirit. We shall never be sinlessly perfect in this life, but if we come to Christ we shall have the means to overcome sin, and to make definite progress towards becoming perfect.

Are you aware that your life is in the grip of sin? Perhaps there are times when you wish you did not do the things that you do, and yet you are unable to stop. You just do not have it in you to break sinful habits. Perhaps you have an uncontrollable temper. Perhaps you are enslaved by alcoholic drink, or drugs. Perhaps you are addicted to pornography and sexual immorality. Here is great news for you: Jesus has the power to set you free from the grip of sin in your life. He says "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

4) Sight for the blind

In our natural state we are blind as regards the things of God. We just do not understand spiritual things. The Bible makes no sense to us. We have no interest in the things of God. We are like men groping around in a dungeon deep underground with no light. We just cannot make sense of our lives.

This prophecy says that Jesus will provide "release from darkness for the prisoners", or some manuscripts say "for the blind". Are you in a dungeon of darkness and despair? You do not know which way to turn. You are lost, confused, in the dark. Well here is great news for you: If you let him take you by the hand and lead you out, Jesus will bring you out of the dark dungeon and into the sunshine of God's love, where all is clear.

2. How Jesus will fulfil his promise

The passage goes on in verse 2 to speak about how Jesus will do these things for those in need. And we see that the verse

says two things that at first sight appear to be completely contradictory. It says that Jesus will "proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God". The first half of the verse seems to be talking about God's love and forgiveness, and the second half of the verse about God's wrath and vengeance on sin.

How do we reconcile the apparent contradiction in this verse? We will do so when we realise that what the verse is talking about is the Cross that Jesus would go through, which would be the means by which he would bring into reality the promises of verse 1 for all those who trust in him.

The Cross was "the day of vengeance of our God" for the sin of his people. As Jesus hung on the Cross, God poured out on him the wrath and anger that he had towards the sin of his people. God rightly has a just and holy anger against our sin. We have grievously sinned against his holy law, time and time again. It is right that he should take vengeance for sin. But that vengeance was poured out on his own dear Son as he hung on the Cross.

It has been suggested that the idea that God punished his own Son for the sins of his people is "cosmic child abuse". On the contrary, it is the clear teaching of Scripture, that Jesus willingly endured on the Cross the punishment that we deserved for our wrongdoing. God did nothing wrong in punishing Christ in our place. It was the most perfect and the most loving thing that has ever been done in the history of the world.

This is the basis for the promises of verse 1 in this passage. This is how there is good news for the poor, because on the Cross Jesus was "debited" with our spiritual poverty that we might be "credited" with his spiritual riches. This is how there can be healing for the broken-hearted, because in

the Cross all our sins are paid for, and we can know the healing and joy of sins forgiven and peace with God. This is how there can be freedom from slavery to sin, because in the Cross the power of sin, and the power of the devil, were broken. Because our guilt has been paid for, the devil no longer has a hold on us. We have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. The "old man" that wanted to serve sin has died with Christ on the Cross, and the "new man" which wants to please God has been raised to life with Christ. This is how we can come out of the gloomy dungeon into the light of God's love, because as a result of the Cross the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all God's people, and one of the things he does is to shine the light of the knowledge of God's love into the hearts of God's people.

For whom do these things apply? For those who come to Christ as spiritual beggars, knowing that they have nothing they can offer God. It is those who rely, not on themselves, but on Christ and what he did on the Cross, who receive the benefits of that Cross. Have you done this? Have you realised that all your "righteousness is as filthy rags" in God's sight? Have you come to Christ and received him as your Saviour? If you have not done so before, come to him today.

3. The results of Jesus' work in our lives

Verse 3 of the passage we are considering tells us the results that will follow from Jesus' work in us. What is said in this verse can be summarised as follows: Jesus will give joy instead of grief, and strength instead of weakness.

1) Joy instead of grief

The verse tells us that Jesus will "provide for those who grieve in Zion." Zion is the Old Testament word for the church, for God's people. Jesus will provide a source of comfort for those

amongst God's people who previously have grieved. The verse then goes on to talk about three ways in which that comfort will be seen. It says, firstly, that God's people will have a "crown of beauty instead of ashes." In Biblical times when people were really sad they would put ashes on their heads, as a way of showing how miserable they were. The verse says that instead of wearing ashes on their heads, God's people will now wear a crown of beauty. Then, secondly, it says that they will have the "oil of gladness instead of mourning". Again, in Biblical times if someone was really happy he would put oil on his head, or allow someone else to, as a way of expressing great gladness. The passage says that God's people will have the sign of gladness about them instead of mourning. Then the third way in which this gladness will be seen is through God's people having "a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair". God's people will be "clothed" or covered with praise and thanksgiving. Instead of being full of misery, gloom and self-pity, they will be looking out of themselves and at God's goodness, and so as a result will be full of thanksgiving. So the people of God will be full of joy and thanksgiving for what God has done.

Are you a Christian? Have you trusted in Christ as your Saviour? If so, are you rejoicing in what God has done for you? This passage says that rejoicing is your birthright as a Christian. If you have difficulty in rejoicing, think of the terrible condition you were in before God saved you. Remember what God has done for you in Christ. Think of the glory that will be yours at the resurrection. Rejoice! Throw off the shroud of gloom and despair that has enveloped your soul! Get rid of the bitterness, anger, resentment and self-pity which are so destructive to joy. Consciously meditate on the goodness of God. Ask for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit, that God would directly speak to your heart about how much he loves you.

2) Strength instead of weakness

The verse goes on to say that God's people will "be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD, for the display of his splendour." What a great picture of strength and solidity! Go to some country estates and you will find great oak trees that have been standing for 500 years or more. They have stood firm in the face of great storms and searing droughts. Where lesser trees have quickly perished, these great oaks have endured.

This is what God promises for his people: great strength. Where naturally we would be weak and flimsy, "blown here and there by every wind of doctrine", easily led into temptation and sin, when God works in us we shall be strong and unmovable in our love and devotion to God. We shall be "for the display of his splendour".

Are you a Christian? Have you been born again? Do you know something of the comfort of this passage? Well then, "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Ephesians 6.10). "Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15.58). You are called to honour God by using the resources that he has given you to overcome the sins that used to get you down. Make sure you read your Bible each day. Make sure you have a strong prayer life. Be at meetings of the church. Be involved in direct service of Christ. Do not love this world. Do not give sin any place in your life. Drop your petty quarrels with other believers and, for the sake of the greater cause, link arm in arm with other believers to engage in the great battle against Satan and his host.

But what if you are not as yet a Christian? What should you do? Here are some steps for you to follow:

Realise your need. You need to realise that you are poor spiritually. In fact you are bankrupt. You are a slave of sin. You are on your way to Hell. You are utterly unable to save yourself. Without Christ you have no basis for any happiness or joy, no reason to live. You are in the dungeon, in the darkness, blind, lost and without hope.

Realise that Christ is the answer. He is the one who can save you from Hell. He is the one who can take away your sin. He is the one who can change your life. He is the one who can give meaning and purpose to your existence. He can give you real peace and joy.

Ask Jesus to save you. If you do so, meaning it with all your heart, he will do so. It makes no matter whether you have previously lived a moral and religious life, or whether you have previously lived a life of out and out sin. Whatever your background he will save you if you ask him to. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10.13). Come to him now. Do not delay. Do not hold back.

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