

GOOD NEWS THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Isaiah 61:1-3 | Third Sunday after Epiphany | January 24/27, 2019

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

J.J.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

We all like to receive good news, don't we? The weather is going to warm up next week. You're getting a tax refund this year. You got an A on your algebra test. Each of those is an example of good news, but none of them are particularly life-changing.

How about these? The enemy has surrendered; the war is over! The treatments worked. The tumor is gone. Congratulations! You have a beautiful, healthy baby girl. Those are all examples of life-changing good news. Nothing will ever be the same again. After hearing such news, *you'll* never be the same again.

The portion of God's Word before us today is all about good news, earth-shattering good news, the kind of good news that changes everything. Under the Spirit's inspiration, the prophet Isaiah wrote the words of our text, words that only the Messiah could speak. Seven centuries later, in his hometown synagogue in a little backwater burg called Nazareth, Jesus Christ read Isaiah's words and said: **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"** (Luke 4:21).

My friends, Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world. That's

good news. Let's spend a few moments considering this GOOD NEWS THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING.

I. Life before the Good News

It will help us to understand a bit about Isaiah and the times in which he lived. As I said, Isaiah lived and worked about 700 years before Christ. Things were not good for God's chosen people in those days. They were not living as his people. They forgot about his covenant and broke his laws. For this reason God was about to send the Babylonians to carry them off into captivity. Isaiah warned them about this, and also promised that God would eventually rescue them from Babylon. But in the second half of his book, Isaiah concentrates on a different and greater rescue operation. Isaiah foretold the coming of the Servant of the Lord. He would come to rescue all people from sin and death.

Why was this rescue necessary? Listen to the words that the Messiah speaks through Isaiah's pen, words that describe the natural spiritual condition of all people. He calls them *poor* and *brokenhearted*. He says that they are *captives* and *prisoners*. He says that their lives are characterized by *grief* and *mourning*, and that because of this they live in *ashes* and *despair*.

These words describe all people as they are by nature. Which means they describe us. And so we better get a handle on just what they tell us. Let's look at each of them more carefully.

First, Isaiah describes us as *poor*. He's not talking about our financial situation; he's talking about our natural spiritual condition. Spiritually speaking, we sinners don't have two pennies to rub together. We are bankrupt, buried up to our necks in the debt of sin, unable to pay it off and make things right with God.

Next, Isaiah describes us as *brokenhearted*. If you've ever had your heart broken – by a lost love, by a betrayal from someone you thought you could trust – you know it's one of the worst feelings in the world. Sin does that to us. Sin shatters our hearts into a million pieces. It ruins our relationships, robs us of hope and takes away our joy. And, again, there's nothing we can do to repair our broken hearts.

The next words aren't any more encouraging. Isaiah describes us sinners as *captives* and *prisoners*. Sin takes away our freedom. Sin enslaves us. Left on our own, we could never live the way God want us to, a life of love for both him and our neighbor. No, all we can do on our own is serve ourselves. And there is no way we could ever hope to escape the dark prison cell of our rebellion.

What's left for us then? *Mourning. Grief. Ashes. Despair*. In ancient times people who were in mourning would sometimes do so in sackcloth and ashes. They would

put on rough clothing made of prickly goat's hair and then dump ashes on top of their head. The idea was to be really uncomfortable. That's what sin does. It makes us uncomfortable. It causes us to mourn over the life that has been lost, a life of peace and joy with our God. It bring despair over what the future holds for the sinner, a well-deserved eternity of suffering apart from God and his blessings.

II. Life after the Good News

Thanks for sticking with me so far. I know that wasn't easy to hear. But that's exactly what life would be like for us without the good news – nothing but poverty, pain and prison, a life of death and despair. That's what life *would be* like for us, but that's not what life *is* like for us because of a little something called the gospel. We have good news. The good news is that God has cleaned up our mess. The good news is that God has fixed everything. The good news is that we have a Savior. Isaiah lays out his mission for us. Listen as Messiah tells us in his own words what he came to do.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. What's good news when you're poor? You're not poor anymore. You're rich. Jesus has made sure that we no longer have to fear the spiritual debtor's prison of hell. He paid off our debt with his priceless blood shed on the cross. He gave up his own wealth and glory to take our place and buy us out of poverty. Paul sums it up this

way: **You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** Now our accounts burst with spiritual assets: forgiveness, life and salvation.

Our Savior continues: **He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.** There's no better cure for a broken heart than finding love again. Sin broke our hearts. Sin ruined our lives. Sin left us empty. But Jesus picked up the pieces of our heart and put them back together again. He is our one true love. He is the Bridegroom and we are his bride. And, oh, how he love us! **Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.** He laid down his life for us. He washed us clean and betrothed us to himself in Baptism. Through faith in him we are holy in his sight, his perfect, blameless bride.

Our Bridegroom tells us that he came **to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.** Jesus is our walking, talking, living, breathing, flesh and blood, God and man, get-out-of-jail-free card. Free for us that is, but not free for him. No he paid a heavy price. He gave up his life. He endured the pain and punishment we deserve. He suffered hell in our place forsaken by his own Father. He willingly took on the guilt, the responsibility for our sins. And God

damned him in our place. The result for us? Freedom! No more dark dungeon of death for us. The prison doors have been flung wide open. We are free from our chains. We are captives no more.

And there's still more good news. Jesus came **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 joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.** There is much that grieves us in life: relationships on the rocks, the damage caused by our own selfishness and the sins of others, the deaths of dear loved ones, the regret of our past sins and the guilt that threatens to crush our spirits. The daily pain of life in a world filled with disease, despair and death, a world that sanctions and even celebrates the murder of babies. There's more than enough hurt and sadness to go around.

We could easily spend all our days in sackcloth and ashes. But our Savior won't have it. He comforts us. He replaces the dust and ashes with the soothing oil of joy. He takes off the rough sackcloth and replaces it with a garment of praise. He clothes us in the robe of his own righteousness. He says, **"I am the Resurrection and the Life"** (John 11:25). He says, **"I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!"** (Revelation 1:18). He has defeated sin and defanged death forever. All who believe in him have the sure hope of life, life the way God meant it to be, eternal life in heaven.

As if all this wasn't enough, this is how Messiah describes us, his believing children: **They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.** What a change! In Christ we have changed from dead, desiccated branches destined for the fire, to solid oaks, green and full of life, and bearing abundant fruit. The Lord planted us for one purpose: to display his splendor.

What does that mean? In today's Prayer of the Day, we offered this petition: **Anoint us with the power of your Spirit that we, too, may bring good news to the afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captive.** We are not a purposeless people. This is our joyous job, our mission in life, our reason for existence. We are to display the Lord's splendor. And how do we do that? By sharing the good news. By telling everyone the wonders he has done. By pointing others to the cross and empty tomb and the magnificent, saving love that we find there. By living the kind of lives that bring him glory.

My friends, millions ask every day: *Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?* You have an answer to that question. You have a beautiful purpose in life, a daily mission that is both for the good of your neighbor and the glory of your God. Jesus summed it up for us: **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation"** (Mark 16:15). By word and deed, direct people's attention to their Savior and your Savior, Jesus Christ, the Anointed One.

"Congratulations! You just won \$5,000 a week from Publishers Clearing House." Life-changing good news, right? My friends, \$5,000 a week is nothing compared to the riches that are yours in Christ. He is your Savior. That changes everything, now and forever. Amen.

S.D.G.