

The Gospel of God

Isaiah 61

Introduction

Please turn to Isaiah 61. Two weeks ago Ken spoke on Isaiah 60, which is God's message of hope for the future of his people. In that chapter God promises that he will cause his glory to rise upon his people. Even though his people Israel lived for so long in unbelief, God was going to cause his glory to be seen in them. And as his glory rises upon them, the nations would be drawn to their light and will recognize that their God is the Lord of heaven and earth.

Now like so many prophecies this will have its ultimate fulfillment in eternity but God's Word warrants us to believe that WE will experience these things now as a foreshadowing of this ultimate reality. The Apostle Paul says in 2 Cor.3:18-"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." As we behold the glory of the Lord and are impacted by it, we ourselves are also transformed in growing degrees with the same glory.

And so, as God's people today, we should live with this anticipation of his glory rising upon his church. Ken reminded us that we shine God's glory as we grow to love others, and to hold fast to God's Word, and to proclaim the gospel.

But what has power for God to transform people who once were dead in their sin and enslaved to it and to make them alive so that his glory rises in us? How does he plan to transform even the people of Israel who for so long lived in darkness and failed to reflect his glory? This is what chapter 61 is all about. There is only one thing that has the power to transform us so that God's glory is reflect in us and around us. It is the transforming power of the Gospel.

We see the gospel's true power as it is proclaimed in Isaiah 61. The Gospel has power because of its invitation, because of its promises, and because of its purpose. Lets look at each of these: The Gospel's Invitation--vv 1-3, the Gospel's Promises--vv 1-7, and the Gospel's Purpose--vv 3, 10-11.

Now why is the gospel so powerful? First, we see an answer in the Gospel's Invitation.

1. The Gospel's Invitation vv 1-3

A. We all love to be invited

Isaiah 61 begins by God anointing his messenger to preach good news. And what stands out to us are those to whom the messenger is sent and those God invites to hear this news. It is one of the most unusual invitations ever extended. Most invitations are given to those we know or important people we would love to be connected with. Typically, if you are well liked or have money or fame, you get invitations to things.

I remember in high school when I heard the rumor that Ann Wagner was having a party I waited with great anticipation to be invited. Ann was this very cute young lady and just a few weeks before this rumor got out that she was having a party she seemed to notice me for the first time and I was kind of wondering if she might have an interest in me. I remember waiting and asking myself, "Am I going to be invited to this party." And then one afternoon as I was walking down the hall of the school I saw Ann walking from the other direction. And as I walked closer and closer to her all I could think is, "Is she going to invite me to the party?" And then those sweet words. "Hey, Paul." "Yah?" "I'm having a party on Friday, would you like to come?" "That would be great." And as I walked by her I started floating down the hall. "I just got invited to THE party. Yah!"

We all love to be invited. But this invitation is not to the popular or the powerful or the prestigious. It is to the poor and the brokenhearted and the captive.

One day down the road God's people from the southern kingdom of Judah would be invaded by the new world power, Babylon, and they would be taken away as slaves. The northern kingdom had already been conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians, but now the sins of the southern kingdom would finally catch up with them. It would be a dark day that would last 70 years, but in the midst of this darkness God graciously holds out hope to those whose hearts were truly humbled through the exile.

B. Those God invites

1. God holds out hope as he invites the poor. These are the downtrodden and disadvantaged who see their spiritual poverty. As Jesus taught, these are "poor in spirit." The poor in spirit know that they have tried to feed on the things of this world and have been left empty. They have a deep dissatisfaction of the soul, and have learned as they have run from one dry morsel of the world to another that nothing in this world satisfies. And in their poverty they cry out and reach up, and realize that what they are looking for must come from God.

The poor are also the ones who have nothing to offer but recognize that their hands are empty. They have no excuses and they know that their greatest problem is not the car which broke down last week nor is it the kids that won't obey nor the husband that has just left, but rather their greatest problem is the sin that has left them bankrupt before a holy God. The poor know that only God's mercy will save them. So God invites the poor.

2. He also invites the brokenhearted. These are the ones who have been crushed by the destruction of sin. They too have gone their own way and found that being the god of their own life leads nowhere. The brokenhearted no longer hope in the false gods of being in control of your life and the determiner of your destination. The brokenhearted have come to their senses (This is the good thing about broken heartedness). And they too cry out and reach up and realize that their help must come from God.

3. And finally, God invites the captive or the prisoner. These have become enslaved and they not only know the destruction of sin but also the power of sin, and these are the ones who know that they will only be rescued by a powerful Savior. They have tried again and again to save themselves, but they have come to realize that sin has enslaved them and they know that only God has the power to save, and so they too reach up and look to God for salvation.

C. Application to God's invitation

The real question for you and me is this: Are WE the poor, the brokenhearted, and the prisoner or have we become rich, and self-satisfied and falsely secure. We are reminded of the words of Jesus Christ to the Church of Laodicea in Revelations 3:17-"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

These words of Christ to his church reflect the words of Isaiah and they lead us to understand something very important about the faith of the Christian. While Christ, on the one hand, has transformed our lives and has made us rich and has given us hope, on the other hand, we still remain needy and poor and blind and naked.

The other day I was talking to another pastor in the city and he is the kind of man who loves talking about theology, and he asked me, "What do you think Paul, is it proper for the Christian to see himself as a saint or as a sinner?"

I responded by saying, "What does God teach us in his Word? Doesn't he emphasize the glorious work that Jesus Christ has accomplished on our behalf, so that we are no longer enemies but children of God, so that we are no longer slaves to sin but free people, so that we are no longer fearful of condemnation but are filled with confidence that we will receive grace?"

And as we are now defined by what Jesus Christ has done for us, does God not also teach us, and even warn us, in texts like Romans 7 and Hebrews 2 and Revelation 3 that we still have a very powerful enemy inside of us called "sin?" And if we do not take this enemy seriously, if we do not have a robust view of sin's power in the believer, we will not continue to see our need for a great Savior and grow to lean upon the benefits of his death on our behalf and rely upon his Spirit with sincere faith? Will we not face the danger of self-sufficiency which our God warns us about in many places in his Word?"

The first reason that the gospel is the only instrument powerful enough to transform us, whether you are coming to God for the first time or coming to God for the ten thousandth time is that it keeps revealing to you and me that we are poor and needy and blind and naked...that we are still people who desperately need God's mercy. And apart from the mercy of God that we receive through Jesus Christ we have no hope.

Now certainly there is a danger of not believing the grace God offers to us in Jesus Christ. But there is another danger. It is the danger of self-sufficiency, and therefore, any doctrine, or emphasis of teaching, or any personal perspective that is contrary to a deepening sense of our need for grace is an enemy of our soul, because God opposes the proud but he gives grace to the humble. In a sense, whenever we hear the gospel proclaimed rightly our great need for a Savior is always the starting point.

Seeing our great need is the beginning of coming to faith in Jesus Christ, but it is the path that we are called to continue to walk, and even cultivate. So this morning I ask, how do you see yourself? Do you still see that you are the needy one? Do you still experience a brokenness over your sin against God? Do you realize the power of sin so you reach up and look to God's Spirit by faith to set you free? In your neediness God will continue to transform you by the power of the gospel, because he invites the humble.

And what glorious news he proclaims to us. We see this good news in the promises of the gospel. This is the second reason the gospel alone has power to transform us.

2. The Gospel's Promises vv 1-7

A. The good news of God's provision

We begin by seeing that God has promised to provide for our salvation. Here, we cannot lose sight of the larger context in which this prophecy is given. The prophecy of chapter 61 is made in the context of Isaiah 52 and 53. And in those chapters God tells us of Someone who is coming who will be despised by man but he will be highly esteemed by God. He will be despised by man because he does not have the appearance of some Hollywood star and his message honestly addresses our real problem of sin, but he will be esteemed by God because the One who is to come is his Son, and his Son does the unimaginable. He gives himself in our place to receive the full force of God's wrath against our sin. Isaiah 53:5-6 describes it this way, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, and he was crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

God comes to the poor and the brokenhearted and the prisoner and he says, "I have good news for you. Though your sins have separated you from me, I have provided a way back, a way to have peace with me, again. There is Someone who lived the life you should have lived, and then took on the punishment of death that you deserve. But because he has taken your place, if you put your faith in him, his life and death will become the provision for your forgiveness and salvation.

This is good news.

B. God's great provision through Christ opens the way for his promises

But this is only the beginning of God's promises. Not only has God made provision for our salvation through Jesus Christ, but for those who believe in him, his life, death, and resurrection open the gate to all of God's great promises to us.

In the first three verses God tells us some of these promises. For the brokenhearted God is able to bind up or heal the wounds you have experienced from sin. For the prisoner God has come to set you free. He has also come to give comfort for those who mourn, to take the ashes of your life and create something beautiful, to take your mourning and turn it into gladness, and to take your faint spirit and to clothe you with a spirit of praise. Folks, this is amazing transformation. It is the work of God and it is the power of the gospel for those who believe it. And the more we believe the gospel of God in our daily lives the more God's transforming power works within us.

For example, as you see how truly self-centered you are and how you have a hard time responding patiently to people who don't do what you want, it is easy to throw your hands up in despair and think, I am never going to really change. But if you believe that God has come and his regeneration of your soul has already set me free from the slavery of sin, then you can take sin by the throat and say, "Now listen here, you are not my master. I do not have to follow your urgings. God has set me free as I have believed the gospel."

Or for example, you fight with depression. There is this gray cloud that hangs over your head. How do you deal with this? As I fought with this issue as a young Christian I realized that the primary issue of the battle was not how I was seeing myself but it was how I was viewing God and then how I was believing in his promises to me. When God says that he has come to replace our mourning with gladness this is not some pie in the sky dream. This is God's true promise for our lives.

In a similar way, Jesus Christ teaches his disciples in John 15:10 to abide in his love by keeping his commandments and then he tells them, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

So what we see in Isaiah is that God promises are given to lead us into a life of ever deepening joy, and that the aim of loving obedience to God's commandments has the same purpose. Joy will mark our lives. But the real battle takes place in the believing of God's promises.

If I could honor my wife and the grace of God at work in her in this season of suffering, one thing that has characterized her journey the past couple months as she slips away into death is the joy of her spirit. This has really served me as the sorrow of losing her pierces my heart. Her joyful countenance keeps leading me back to the reality that even in the face of death because of the great promises of God given to us in Jesus Christ, we have much for which to be joyful.

Her joy has even impacted the social worker who has been working with us through hospice. She told me this past week that "in all my years of caring for people I have never seen someone who has so much hope for the future and anticipates so much good." The reason that Cindy anticipates so much good even as she suffers now is the confidence she has that in Christ the promises of God are "Yes" to her.

God's promises are great toward us. They are promises of hope and power and joy and blessing. But in fighting for faith in these promises we face a particular battle of falling back into living for our own glory and satisfaction so we want God to promise comfort and ease and quick deliverances, and we fail to see that God wants to do so much more in our life.

Folks, God's Word is clear and it exposes the bad theology which has sprouted up from the Western world which promises "your best life now." And the sad thing is it robs us of finding our greatest delight and satisfaction in God and experiencing his faithfulness as we live out our days in a sinful, fallen world.

This leads us to the final point, the gospel's purpose. Verse 3 tells us that God gives us beauty in place of ashes, and gladness in place of mourning, and praise instead of a faint spirit that his people "may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified."

3. The Gospel's Ultimate Purpose

A. A righteous people

Nothing glorifies God more than to take a person who once was dead in his sin and who lived for himself and his own glory, and transform him to live for God and God's glory, so that what characterizes his life is righteousness...a heart set apart to God alone.

By now it was a little over 650 years since God had called his people out of Egypt and the whole time he fought with Israel's unfaithfulness. But here, God prophesies of a different day, a day in which his people will actually be righteous. And their righteousness will be strong like oak trees so that God will be glorified by his people.

B. What will make us oaks of righteousness?

This brings us back to the question I asked at the beginning: What has the power to transform people in such a dramatic way? Verse 10 tells us again of the gospel's power. It says, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exalt in my God, FOR he has clothed me with garments of salvation and he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

This righteousness grows out of a work done by God. He clothes us with garments of salvation and he covers us with the robe of righteousness.

As we study God's Word he teaches us that his salvation involves two primary works: One, he takes away our sin and he gives us the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is a great exchange. Theologically, we call this *imputed righteousness*. This is not a righteousness that we have on our own but it is given to us by God. It is a *standing of righteousness* which our holy God requires for his wrath against our sin to be satisfied and for us to have peace with him. And as our sins are taken away and we are clothed in Christ's perfect righteousness, God dresses us for a wedding. And the fulfillment of that wedding is talked about in Revelation 19 where we will see our Groom, Jesus Christ, face to face, and we will sit down and share in a great banquet. Oh, I can't wait.

The other work that God does in our salvation is a powerful work of regeneration by his Spirit in which he transforms our inner being. By the work of God's Spirit our eyes are opened to what is real, we believe the truth of the gospel, and we are made new inside so that our affections are changed. Instead of loving ourselves and this world, God gives us a new heart. This leads his people to be *personally righteous* so that our greatest affection is for God alone.

C. What kind of righteousness is Isaiah talking about here?

The righteousness talked about in Isaiah is not some surface righteousness where we give lip service to God. It is not simply an outward conformity to rules which any religion can produce. No, this is a true inner transformation that creates a real affection for God and a loving obedience to his Word.

Verse 11 speaks of a "righteousness and praise that sprouts up before all the nations." These two words are put together to again give us an idea of what kind of righteousness Isaiah is talking about here. It is appropriate that righteousness and praise are put together because the righteousness that God wants to produce in our hearts is an adoration for God. It is a true heart affection and finding our joy in him.

This is the purpose of the gospel: to produce a people who adore God more than anything in this world and who will give their very lives as an expression of love for him.

How do we grow to have such affection for God? How do we fight against the force of sin to turn us back to love ourselves and this world? If we look at many Christians, today, it seems like many who profess faith in Christ have the same problem as Israel did.

So is it right to say that God has fulfilled this prophecy in his church? YES, he has fulfilled this prophecy in us. He has established a new covenant with his people which has led him to give us a new heart and his Spirit to live within us. This picture of righteousness is exactly what he is doing in us, today. But if this is so, then what is happening with all these professing Christians who seem to be unchanged by the gospel?

I would say that one of two things is happening. One, many of them have not been transformed because they have believed a false gospel, a gospel which has no power. So many today are preaching a gospel that has little or nothing to do with God. John Piper laments in his book, *God is the Gospel*, and says that "it is stunning how seldom God himself is proclaimed as the greatest gift of the gospel....In place of this, we have turned the love of God and the gospel of Christ into a divine endorsement of our delight in many lesser things, especially the delight in our being made much of."

And his response to this is right on target. He states, "The acid test of biblical God-centeredness and faithfulness to the gospel is this: Do you feel more loved because God makes much of you, or because, at the cost of his Son, he enables you to enjoy making much of him forever? Does your happiness hang on seeing the cross of Christ as a witness of your worth, or as a way to enjoy God's worth forever?"

For at least two generations now we have embraced a false gospel that has little to do with God and his call of repentance, and more to do with how he wants to lead you to reach your full potential now.

And a second reason why the church often doesn't look much different than Israel is that we have wrongly believed that the gospel is for the lost and not the Christian. We have lost sight of Christ's words to his church, -"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

The power of God to transform his people is found in the good news God proclaims in the gospel, and if we believe the words of Christ are true, that we are still wretched, and pitiable, and poor, and blind, and naked, then the gospel continues to be the best news that we have ever heard, and it is good news to us, today.

Closing

So if you have come as someone who is needy, that is good. God holds out hope to you and he says, "I have good news for you. Turn from your sin back to me and I will show mercy to you. My Son has satisfied my wrath against your sin and I will set my love on you. Now let me turn your sorrow into joy and your ashes into something beautiful."

This is the glorious news of the Gospel which God holds out to us today. Now he is calling you to believe it.