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Isaiah 61:1-11 – *Crying Out: Bring Us Good News!*

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Isaiah 61:1-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ 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. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

⁴They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. ⁵Strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. ⁶And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. ⁷Instead of your shame you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours. ⁸“For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”

¹⁰I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

Do you remember how you felt on Nov 9th when Pfizer announced they had a vaccine?

A vaccine that was over 90% effective in preventing COVID.

Then Moderna made a similar announcement about their vaccine...

A different vaccine with effective rates again over 90%.

This is good news to a weary world...

A world full of people who have been at it for 9 months.

People are dying...

Hospitals are at or over capacity...

I miss my family...

The rules were just changed and they cannot visit now...

You miss your family and friends.

We were crying out:

“Bring us some good news!”

The world needed this good news...

To know that things will not be like this forever.

The Israelites need to hear some good news.

They are a hurting people...

They are in bad shape.

Reading through these first few verses...

We get a sense of how beat up these people really are.

They're called “poor.” (61:1)

This means more than just being without resources—

More than lacking the basic necessities of life—

It means oppressed...

Those who are treated harshly by those in power.

It means those who are beat up by life.

John Oswalt, in his commentary on Isaiah, describes “poor” like this:

“Those who are so broken by life that they have no more heart to try;”

“those who are so bound up in their various addictions that liberty and release are a cruel mirage;”

“those who think that they will never again experience the favor of the Lord, or see his just vengeance meted out against those who have misused them;”

“those who think that their lives hold nothing more than ashes, sackcloth, and the fainting heaviness of despair.”

This is “poor”...

The Israelites are poor.

These are a people whose lives have been uprooted...

Who have no firm foundation to stand on...

Everything has been destroyed...

They return home to ruin and devastation.

We also read that these people are in need of wound care:

“He has sent me to bind/bandage up the brokenhearted.” (61:1)

This takes readers back to the first chapter of Isaiah:

Why do you persist in rebellion?

Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart afflicted.

⁶From the sole of your foot to the top of your head
there is no soundness—
only wounds and welts
and open sores,
not cleansed or bandaged... (1:5-6)

Israel has wounds that are open...

Sores that are infected and oozing pus.

Wounds that need to be cleaned and bandaged.

These wounds that cover Israel from top to bottom...

Are a result of Israel’s sin...

The people’s rebellion against their God...

His children are not following in his ways.

While some of their problems are a result of living in a broken world...

They also have to own up to their part...

They need to take responsibility for their sin.

Their sin has caused them hardship and pain.

Israel is in bad shape:

Poor, brokenhearted, captive, prisoners, mourning, grieving, despair, devastation, shame, and disgrace...

All words used in our passage.

Israel needs to hear some good news...

“Bring us good news!” they’re crying out.

We need to hear some good news.

We’ve been at this for 9 months now.

9 months ago, churches went to online worship;

9 months ago, students had their school year cancelled;

9 months ago, surgeries and appointments were postponed;

9 months ago, we started working from home;

Restrictions were placed on where we could go and who we could see...

9 months ago.

It looked like things were starting to come around this summer...

But here we are...

Back to where we were 9 months ago.

A lot of people are weary and exhausted.

A lot of us are fed up with coronavirus...

“Bring us some good news!”

We needed to hear news about a vaccine.

We needed to hear that there is a potential end to these times...

That things *will* get better!

But how strong is this vaccine, really?

What will your life look like in, say, 2-3 years...

When life has returned back to “normal?”

How different will things *really* be for you?

These last 9 months have been revealing:

For some of us, it has revealed how burned out we were before the pandemic.

We've enjoyed this time of rest and isolation...

It's been refreshing for us.

2-3 years down the road, will you be pushing it too hard again?

Will a vaccine fix our tendency to overwork and neglect rest?

For others of us, these 9 months have revealed cracks in our relationships.

We're no longer able to hide by going to the office...

Or being with other people...

Taking the focus off of our problems.

Time in isolation with spouses or family members has revealed wounds...

Areas that need attention.

Some of us have done good/hard relational work during these times...

But others of us are barely hanging on...

Marriages and relationships are falling apart.

Will the end of coronavirus fix this?

2-3 years down the road—

After the pandemic is under control—

Will our relationships, honestly, be any better?

For others of us, these last 9 months have revealed a lot about our relationship with God.

We learned that we don't depend on him as much as we think.

When life get tough—

When we get exhausted—

We turn to other things to get us by:

Sometimes we check out by bingeing on Netflix or social media.

Some of us have seen an increase in our substance use...

Drinking, smoking (cigs/weed), eating, spending, using pornography.

2-3 years down the road, will we be more dependent on God?

Will a COVID vaccine be strong enough to change our relationship with God?

The pandemic didn't so much create *new* problems for us...

As much as it amplified the conditions we already had.

The pandemic has been like a giant magnifying glass placed over our lives...

Causing all of our hurts, hang-ups, addictions, anxieties and habits to be enlarged.

All of these things will most likely continue to be there in 2-3 years...

Because our broken condition will still be the same.

A Pfizer or Moderna vaccine might prevent COVID...

But it doesn't fix the broken condition we have.

Things might get *better*...

But will we be *healed*?

A vaccine is great news...

But we need something stronger.

We need something that will last...

Something that will truly change our lives.

We need the Lord to heal us.

To the people of Israel...

Isaiah prophesies good news.

God promises restoration through the Messiah...

Through the one anointed by the Spirit of the Lord. (cf. Isa 11:2)

Look at the good news promised to the people:

First, God's people are promised righteousness.

Israel's biggest problem isn't that their city is destroyed...

It isn't that they were held captive for 70 years...

It isn't that foreigners had taken over their land.

No, these are all consequences they earned for turning away from the Lord.

These things were given to them as a result of their sin.

Their afflictions—

These symbolic open sores and wounds from head to toe—

Are because they broke covenant with God.

God rescued Israel once and said:

“I’m your God, you’re my people. I’ll continue to be your God. Follow me.”

“I make you holy. I make you righteous. Follow me.”

But they turned from God...

They went against God’s laws...

Sinning against God.

When you distance yourself from God...

You distance yourself from righteousness.

When Israel sinned against God...

They made themselves unrighteous...

Deserving of God’s full vengeance.

Now, God brings good news of salvation and deliverance.

He promises to make his people “oaks of righteousness.” (Isa 61:3)

Oak trees are strong and stable;

They are permanent fixtures on the landscape.

Righteous oaks reflect God’s beauty, God’s purity, and God’s holiness.

Righteous oaks produce fruit consistent with God’s fruit...

Showing God’s righteousness. (Oswalt)

When God wraps his people in his robe of righteousness (61:10)...

His people are delivered.

They are delivered from unrighteousness—

Saved from punishment and wrath—

And given the power to live righteous lives. (Oswalt)

For God’s people, righteousness = healing.

Healing the deepest wounds they have.

This is what God promises his people.

Second, God's people are promised a different relationship to the nations.

Right now, they're oppressed.

Right now, they're captives and prisoners...

With their enemies ruling over them.

God says, "No more!"

"You will be free."

"You will be released from bondage."

But don't think that it's merely a switch in power.

Israel won't just turn around and oppress their former oppressors...

Instead, they will become priests.

They will have the responsibility of pointing their former oppressors to the one, true God.

They will be responsible for teaching the nations God's ways...

Priests and ministers of the Lord.

God will bless his people—

Nations will recognize that they are blessed—

So that through them, the world will be blessed.

God promises that they will be free from their enemies...

And will in turn lead the nations to the Lord.

Third, joy is promised to God's people.

This promise of joy is made to people who have *only* known destruction.

Their city—

Their homes...their lives—

Have been lying in ruins for 70 years.

All they know is mourning and despair.

Into this darkness, God speaks a word of light...

A promise of joy.

Ruined cities—

That have been devastated for generations—

Will be renewed. (61:4)

No longer will you be covered with ashes and sackcloth—

Signs of mourning and grief—

Now you will be anointed with the oil of joy.

Not just momentary joy...

But joy that lasts:

“Everlasting joy will be yours.” (61:7)

We can all point to times when we’ve experienced the feeling of joy in life...

Moments of gladness/pleasure where we’re lifted up:

The birth of a child;

Producing something we’re proud of...

That people appreciate;

Seeing family or friends after being separated for a long time;

Having someone tell us that they love us;

Reaching the top of a mountain after a long hike...

There are many things that cause us to feel joy in this life.

What is promised here is everlasting joy...

A joy that doesn’t come and go...

But a joy that takes deep root and continues to give and give and give...

A joy that sticks around...

A joy that lasts!

God makes promises to his people...

Promises of good news:

He promises them righteousness and healing;

He promises that their relationship to the nations will be different;

He promises them joy.

The good news that was only *promised* to Israel...

Has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

These promises have been fulfilled!

What was only a *promise* for them...

Is *reality* for us.

In 2 weeks, we will celebrate Christmas...

When God himself came to live as one of us.

We'll celebrate that these promises have come to life in Jesus Christ:

Where Israel was *promised* righteousness...

We *are* righteous!

Jesus Christ lived a perfect life...

And then he gave it for us.

If your trust is in Jesus Christ you are healed.

There is no more stain from sin covering you...

No more guilt or shame...

You stand pure and holy before God.

What Israel could only *long* for...

We now *live* in.

Where Israel was *promised* a different relationship to the nations...

We have already been given a different relationship with the people around us.

We no longer have to view people as enemies;

Or view people as trying to take advantage of us...

People we need to be afraid or skeptical of;

We don't have to view them as people that we're in competition with.

In Christ, we are content with ourselves...

Who he has made us to be.

We know that we're taken care of...

That God gives us everything we ever need.

We are set free to view people with compassion...

To carry their burdens, because Christ carries ours.

We can grant forgiveness and offer restoration in our relationships...

Because Christ has given this to us.

Our relationship with others has changed...

We are now priests and ministers of the Most High God...

Pointing people to his light and love.

And where Israel was only *promised* joy

This is something that is here, now.

I'm not asking you not to be sad.

There *will* be sadness this Christmas season:

We won't be allowed to gather around the dinner table with our families;

We won't be allowed to be there when our grandchildren open presents;

We cannot expect a visit from our adult children...

I'm not asking you not to feel this.

But I want us to be open to the good news that has already come.

God has entered into our darkness...

He's already delivered on his promise...

This is the good news.

A COVID vaccine is wonderful news...

But it's useful only for preventing COVID.

We need something stronger.

We need something that will last.

We need Jesus Christ.

May we turn our hearts to him now as we prepare to celebrate his birth...

And may we ready our lives for the promise that he will come again.

Amen.