

JESUS is the JOY of Christmas!

Isaiah 61:1-11

Pastor Jim Rademaker

Poor, brokenhearted, captive, mourning, ashes, a faint spirit, ruins, devastations, shame, dishonor. That's who Isaiah is writing to. In one way or another, he could have been writing about any of us, for if we've spent any time at all on this planet, from time to time, we can all find ourselves somewhere in that list.

In the immediate context, Isaiah was referring to those in his day, the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. From Isaiah, chapter 40 to the end of the book, God speaks to a generation of people that had not been born yet, but a generation of people who would find themselves exiled into a foreign land for decades. What's worse, this exile was their own fault. They had no one to blame, but themselves. It was God's punishment for their sinful waywardness - a punishment God brought upon them, only after warning them again and again, to repent, to turn away from their sin, to turn back to Him.

God's chosen people: poor, brokenhearted, captive, mourning, lying in ashes, a faint spirit, ruined, devastated, shamed, dishonored. What hope is there? What do you say to someone in such circumstances? Maybe you find yourself in a similar situation, like wayward Israel, you've strayed away from God. And in loving Fatherly care, He's calling you to turn, and come back to Him. God offers blessing to the hurting and suffering; hope to the hopeless.

Christmas music, Christmas parties, Christmas sales, family gatherings. The joy of "Christmas season" is in full swing! But so is Christmas depression. Our culture places so much emphasis on the "feelings" of Christmas, "*the most wonderful time of the year!*" How often we look for the joy of Christmas in family, or in the sights, sounds, and smells of Christmas. Some claim that the meaning and joy of Christmas can be found in the human spirit, in giving rather than receiving.

But the truth is that family ties are temporary – people move, people die. The joy of family comes and goes. Our generous human spirit is far more self-centered than we care to admit – giving for all kinds of reasons: because we truly want to, because we think we have to, we're supposed to, it makes us feel good, people will be disappointed if we don't, it's what everybody does this time of the year. The joy of the sights and sounds of Christmas: the trees lose their needles, Christmas lights burn out, toys break. And yet, there is true and lasting joy to be found in Christmas.

It's not found in the gifts that are given. It's not found in the music of the holidays. It's not even found in the gathering of family and friends. Listen again to God's Word, to those who've turned from the Lord and been disciplined by Him, as a Father who lovingly disciplines His children:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks; foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers; but you shall be called the priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast.

Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy.

For I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15)

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; 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. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

And it sprouted up and came alive before all nations. And Simeon took him up in his arms and blessed God and said ... *my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.*" (Luke 2)

To bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn. Sound familiar? It should, for its echo is heard from the lips of Jesus, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*"

The Old Testament Patriarchs endured perpetual instability, great family turmoil, and constant struggle to remain faithful. The Prophets may have gained favor with a king or two for a time, but the bulk of their lives was lived in dangerous, relentless, and exhausting opposition from the communities they served ... and rarely ended well.

The disciples sat in the front row for the miracles and teachings of Jesus, but did so as homeless, wandering, never-resting nomads, who gave-up everything for their long-term mission trip. The early church congregations were continually surrounded by noisy, hostile cultures, threatening to remove or destroy or compromise them. And yet, they were all blessed by God. (from John Pavlovitz)

Those who are truly blessed, have nothing to bring to God, but rely solely on Him to provide. They're not poor at all. They lack nothing, for they are given everything, the very kingdom of God. When we're empty, we can do nothing, but receive from God. To be given to by Him. To be blessed by Him.

God speaks to those who find themselves in a tough spot – poor, imprisoned, mourning, exiled into a foreign land. In the midst of their hopelessness, God used Isaiah to bring His people good news that would put joy in their hearts. To give them hope, that with God, there's always forgiveness, always hope, always a new beginning, always a bright future.

"Blessed are those who mourn." Why do we mourn? Because of loss. Loss of a loved one. Loss of a relationship. Loss of health. Loss of abilities. Loss of peace. Loss of control. Blessed are those who mourn. Why? Because it's *not* the end. With God, there's always more. He always gives. Maybe not what we want or in the way we would want, but He always gives what's best, working all things together for good for those who love Him. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God will be their comforter and their comfort. In the end, it will turn out okay. More than okay.

Restoration to Israel, return to the land, rebuilt temple and worship. Hope for the hopeless. Joy for the joyless. But even all of this, was but a down payment, a foreshadowing, of an even greater restoration, a more universal restoration, eternal restoration, eternal good news to the poor in spirit, those brokenhearted by sin, mourning in loss. There would be gain. There would be gift. There would be true righteousness for those without. For those in the bondage of sin, eternal jubilee! God will give all that we lack, and then some. More than we could ever imagine. More than we ever deserve.

It's very likely the synagogue in Nazareth was packed that day, standing room only, to hear from the local boy who made it big. I would also imagine that you could have heard a pin drop when Jesus stood up, took the Isaiah scroll from the attendant, and scrolled specifically to a passage that had to do with the coming of the Messiah, and how He was anointed with the Spirit of God to preach good news and to work miracles.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set a liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then Jesus handed the scroll back to the attendant and sat down. Teachers sat in the synagogue. Every eye was fixed on Him. Every ear was open, and eager to hear, what Jesus was going to say. "*Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" At first, they were amazed and delighted. This was new. They'd never heard anything like this before. The words of the prophet Isaiah, were now fulfilled in their *own* ears. Fulfilled now, in *your* ears.

Those who turn to Jesus in faith *will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.*

Poor, brokenhearted, captive, devastation, shame, dishonor ... and good news. Hope for the hopeless. As it is for us, the greatest joy of Israel was not to be found in good news about future political freedom, in a perfect Christmas, in a perfect life where everything goes *our* way, but in the *greater* good news of God's mercy in His Son. Blessing to the hurting and suffering. Hope for the hopeless.

Tinsel and trees, candles and cookies, family and gifts ... all very nice. There's nothing like the Christmas season! But true and lasting joy ... It's *not* found in the gifts that are given. It's *not* found in the music of the holidays. It's not *even* found in the gathering of family and friends. It's found in Jesus, and all that He's done for you and all that He gives to you. "Find your joy in Jesus!" That's what Isaiah wants you to hear.