

Proclaiming Liberty to the Captives: Isaiah 61
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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We're coming to the close of our study through the Old Testament book of Isaiah. We started in January and have been working our way through various passages in this great portion of Scripture. We'll take chapter 61 this morning and then chapter 64 next Sunday, and that will conclude our time in Isaiah for this sermon series. Then we'll move on to a sermon series on the church.

Isaiah 61, which we'll study this morning, gives us some vivid Gospel imagery. The Lord God, through the prophet Isaiah, is painting a picture for us of what salvation looks like. And that's what the Bible is about, in case you were wondering. This whole big book, made up of many books within it, has a grand storyline that is all about God's great plan of redemption. The Lord's provision for saving wretched sinners like us from the punishment we deserve for our sins. From Adam and Eve in the garden, to the visions of heaven in the book of Revelation, this is a book about salvation.

And I find the descriptions in Isaiah 61 so compelling, so moving. To think of myself as a poor person who has received good news, as a brokenhearted person who is being comforted and healed. And then to think of myself as a captive who has been liberated, a prisoner who has been set free. That's what I want to focus on especially this morning as we think about this passage. I want us to think about Jesus' ministry of proclaiming liberty to the captives.

Just to get us started, think with me for a moment about the nature of freedom and bondage. And think about how there can be appearances of freedom and appearances of bondage, but how things are not always as they seem to be. Appearances can deceive. And that is certainly the case when we think of spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom. It's often the case in our world, because of the deceitfulness of sin, that slavery appears as freedom and freedom appears as slavery. Certain individuals may be applauded by the world as those who have achieved success, freedom, independence, but in reality their inner lives are tormented by the miseries of emptiness and spiritual bondage. On the other hand, there are individuals who are poor and needy in the world's eyes, but have true freedom in Christ.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, depicts this contrast very powerfully toward the end of the book in the relationship between the slave Uncle Tom, and his cruel master, Simon Legree. As it would appear, Tom is the slave and

Legree is the free man – the master. But things are not as they seem. Legree is a wicked man who lives in the bondage of his own vices. His superstitious thinking fuels his fear, and he is haunted by the many evils he has done. Tom, on the other hand, in spite of the abuse he endures, experiences the true freedom of knowing that Christ is his Savior and will one day take him home to heaven.

Legree hated Tom for this. The more Tom showed kindness to Legree and others, the more Legree seethed with anger toward Tom. One evening Legree yelled harshly to Tom to stop singing his hymns and get to bed. Tom cheerfully obeyed, which made Legree so angry that he lashed out with blows. “Tom stood perfectly submissive; and yet Legree could not hide from himself that his power over his [slave] was somehow gone. . . . He understood full well that it was God who was standing between him and his victim, and he blasphemed him.”¹

Then, later, when Legree is threatening to kill Tom, he says to him, “I’ll *conquer ye, or kill ye!*—one or t’ other. I’ll count every drop of blood there is in you, and take ‘em, one by one, till ye give up!” Tom looked up to his master, and answered, “Mas’r, if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I’d *give ye my heart’s blood*; and, if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I’d give ‘em freely, as the Lord gave his for me. O, Mas’r! don’t bring this great sin on your soul! It will hurt you more than ‘t will me! Do the worst you can, my troubles’ll be over soon; but, if ye don’t repent, yours won’t *never end!*”²

You tell me: who’s the free man? According to the laws of the land, Legree may have been a freeman, and Tom a slave. But in reality, the opposite was the case. And that’s a lesson that is so important for us to understand as we think about spiritual bondage and spiritual freedom. There is a vast difference between the pseudo-freedom that the world applauds, but leads to eternal death, and another kind of freedom that comes through Jesus Christ, the only One who can truly liberate us from our spiritual captivity.

Now as we get into our passage here in Isaiah 61, the first thing we must realize is that this passage so clearly anticipates the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Similar to the Servant Songs in earlier chapters, the most well-known being in chapter 53. The descriptions so clearly point to Jesus—His ministry, His suffering, His substitutionary atonement for our sin.

And there’s something very interesting about this passage here at the start of Isaiah 61 in that Jesus Himself applies to His own ministry. The Gospel of Luke records this for us.

¹ Chapter 38. Page 417-8 in Nelson Doubleday edition.

² Chapter 40. Page 436.

Jesus' Reading of Isaiah 61

Read Luke 4:16-21

This is an amazing passage. Jesus is making a very bold statement here in saying that the words of Isaiah are being fulfilled in Him. One thing to notice here is the already / not yet aspect of God's kingdom. The kingdom is *already* active and growing. But it is *not yet* here in its fullness. This passage speaks to that in a really interesting way. If you look closely at Isaiah 61, which Jesus is reading from (and notice that He unrolled the scroll and found this particular place), there's another line which Jesus does not read. The last line Jesus reads is, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And the very next line in Isaiah 61 says, "and the day of vengeance of our God."

I think Jesus intentionally stopped just at that point, because He knew that the day of vengeance would come later. The day of vengeance was not part of what He was fulfilling at that time in His first coming to earth. That is something that will happen in His second coming. This is the already / not yet aspect of the kingdom. Jesus ushered in the kingdom, with the proclamation of good news to the poor and the proclamation of liberty to the captives. But the consummation of the kingdom will not happen until Jesus comes a second time. That's the day we are now waiting for, and that's the day when God will fully unleash His vengeance upon all wickedness.

Here's one application point we can draw from this. We shouldn't be overly discouraged when the Gospel doesn't have the immediate visible impact we want it to have. We long for revival, as I was talking about last Sunday, and we'll talk about some more next Sunday. We want to see many, many people converted and the church purified and strengthened. We want to see ourselves passionate about the things of God. We want to see our communities radically changed by the power of the Gospel. And as we labor, by God's grace, to see those things come about, we also need to understand the age in which we live, and thus not be overly discouraged when the things we pray for don't come about to the extent we desire.

We are living in the time between Christ's first coming and His second coming. And in this overlap of the ages, the Gospel is going forth, people are being saved, God is preserving His people, much good is being done. The kingdom has been inaugurated, but at the same time, the present evil age persists. And so we encounter many people who are resistant to the Gospel. We see wicked people who seem to be very successful in their evil schemes. Sadly, we see much injustice in our world. And so we long for that day when Christ will return. Our aching now, our disappointments now, make us look longingly to that day of

vengeance of our God. That's when every injustice will cease. That's when everything will be put right. And we'll be with our Lord forever in perfect paradise.

Now let's look at some aspects of Jesus' ministry, foreshadowed in Isaiah 61 and highlighted by Jesus in Luke 4. Aspects of His ministry that stir us to praise Him, and that also provide an inspiring example for our own ministries.

We can summarize it like this, then we'll look a bit further at each piece of it: By the power of the Spirit, proclaiming the Good News of liberty to the captives.

By the Power of the Spirit

Let's begin with the first thing mentioned in Isaiah 61 and that Jesus reads publically at the start of His earthly ministry, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me." This points to the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ ministered by the power of the Spirit. Jesus, the Son of God, the 2nd Person of the Trinity . . . He was sent by the Father—the Father being the 1st Person of the Trinity. Jesus obeyed the Father in everything. And Jesus' ministry was empowered by the Holy Spirit, the 3rd Person of the Trinity. All 3 Persons of the Trinity are active in this marvelous plan of redemption. Our Triune God, from eternity past, determined to glorify Himself through the salvation of sinners. And all 3 Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, are integrally involved.

We can see the Spirit's involvement in Jesus' ministry right in the context of Luke 4. Just a bit earlier, at the end of chapter 3, Luke records the baptism of Jesus. Just after Jesus was baptized by John, "the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on [Jesus] in bodily form, like a dove" (Luke 3:21-22). And then there was the temptation of Jesus. Luke 4:1 says, "And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil." The Spirit led Jesus into something that was going to be very difficult, yet was necessary for Him to endure.

Then we read of the Spirit again just a few verses later, at the start of Jesus' ministry. Luke 4:14, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee . . ." That's just before the account of Him coming to the synagogue in Nazareth, where He read from Isaiah 61.

The Holy Spirit was upon Jesus. Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit led Him and empowered Him. How much more so do we need the Spirit's leading and empowering in our lives and ministries?

The same writer, Dr. Luke, recorded in Acts chapter 1 the words Jesus spoke to His disciples just before He ascended to

heaven. Jesus told them, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The same Spirit that was upon Jesus in His ministry is upon us in our ministry, in the mission Jesus commissioned us to in the world. We should recognize our dependence on the Spirit. And we should be encouraged that the Spirit is powerful, and He is working in our midst. That should motivate us to move outward, to take risks, to engage in ministry opportunities that may seem unconventional. Human limitations should not discourage us, because we have the Spirit upon us, in us, empowering us. There is a supernatural factor that we should never forget. And that’s why prayer is such a fundamental piece of our ministries. Prayer is an acknowledgement that we depend on God, we depend on the Spirit working through us.

Proclaiming the Gospel of Liberty

Next let’s talk about what Jesus did in the power of the Spirit. What He did was proclaim the Good News of liberty.

Proclaim, Preach, Herald

Just a word about that word, “proclaim.” Jesus was a preacher. He was a proclaimer. He was a herald. He was a teacher. This is what He did again and again and again, from town to town to town. He proclaimed the Good News. He heralded the Gospel. He, Himself, is that Good News. He is the One who, through His death and resurrection, brings freedom. He liberates those captive to sin, opens the prison doors, and ushers us into the free and abundant life of following Him. This is very Good News indeed. And it’s something we are to herald as well. We are to take this Gospel and proclaim it to the ends of the earth.

Liberty

This theme of liberty is significant throughout the Bible. Going back to the 2nd book of the Bible, the book of **Exodus**, we read of God delivering the Israelites from Egypt. In those miraculous events we have a concrete, historical picture of redemption. The Lord purchases slaves from their bondage and makes them His own. Another powerful picture of this is in the relationship of **Hosea** and his unfaithful wife, Gomer. At the Lord’s instruction, Hosea “bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley.” He redeemed her, in a way that serves as a parable of the way God redeems His people.

In the Person of Jesus Christ, we see the God-Man who became one of us and died in our place in order to pay the price for our redemption, in order to liberate us from our bondage to sin.

What we have to understand is that we are slaves set free. We were once in bondage to sin, but now we are free! Jesus' ministry was focused on this very thing. He came to proclaim liberty to the captives as we read in Isaiah 61 and Luke 4.

Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25)

Leviticus 25 tells us about the year of Jubilee that Israel was to observe every fiftieth year. 49 years would go by, and then there was to be a year of Jubilee. And the focus of that year was liberty. Everyone was to return to their own clan and the land that had been allotted to their clan. Hired servants were to be released. And they were to sound a loud trumpet proclaiming liberty throughout all the land.

There seems to be an allusion to that here in Isaiah 61 in the reference to the year of the Lord's favor. And this is what Jesus declared was being fulfilled in His ministry. Like a trumpet, He was proclaiming liberty! He was ushering in the realities that the Jubilee pointed to, realities that believers experience already now in this life, but not yet in its fullness.

To come back to the already / not-yet theme that I mentioned earlier. Those of us who are in Christ, our sins are forgiven, our debts are paid, we have been released from captivity. But sometimes we act like we're still in chains. We're tempted to return to our old slave masters. But one day all of that will cease entirely. No temptations. No shackles whatsoever. We will live in absolute freedom to fully enjoy our Savior forever.

Jesus' ministry was in the power of the Spirit, and He proclaimed the Good News of liberty. One last thing to notice, and that is who He proclaimed these things to.

Liberty to the Captives

Liberty to the captives, and other descriptions as well. He's proclaiming good news *to the poor*, liberty *to the captives*, recovering of sight *to the blind*, to set at liberty *those who are oppressed*. What vivid depictions of us in our sin. Poor, slaves, blind, oppressed. That's who we are in our sin, apart from Christ.

But Christ, in His perfect life and sacrificial death and His resurrection on the third day, accomplished liberation for us which is good news, which gives us spiritual sight where we were once totally blind.

I believe these descriptions speak primarily of spiritual poverty and oppression. Blindness, poverty, bondage, oppression are all ways of describing our spiritual condition apart from Christ. But we should not overlook the fact that Jesus gravitated toward those who were literally, physically poor and oppressed. Later in Luke 4, Jesus frees a man from demonic oppression, and He heals

many. He had a special compassion for the hurting, for the poor, for the oppressed. And it's often the case that those who are poor and oppressed in this world are open, not only to materially assistance, but are open to hear about the spiritual hope of the Gospel. We, too, should gravitate toward those who are spiritually and physically needy, for we have good news to share.

Here are 4 brief application points, ways we can emulate Jesus' ministry of proclaiming liberty to the captives.

- 1) **Fight to live in the freedom which Christ has given.** Do not go back to your bondage to addictions or to legalism. Do not live in bondage to worry or fear or shame. Know that you are a sinner set free. Don't let those former slave masters control you.
- 2) **Proclaim this Gospel freedom to others.** Pray for the enslaved individuals around you who are shackled by sin, guilt, religion. Be a herald of this message of liberty.
- 3) **Forgive.** Don't be a slaver master by trying to keep people in bondage to your disapproval, to your bitterness toward them. Cut the cords of those grudges which you are using to bind up those who have hurt you. Let them be free from the anger and bitterness you hold against them.
- 4) **Serve the poor and oppressed.** Look for ways to participate in bringing literal, physical liberty to those who are poor and oppressed. For example, combat human-trafficking and find ways to help the victims. Speak up for the sanctity of human life on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. Help orphans and widows and refugees. Support organizations which provide practical help to those in poverty, both locally and around the world.

Let us be a people who relish the freedom bought for us by Christ. And as liberated people, let us, in turn, proclaim this message of liberty to others.

There's a powerful scene at the close of *Les Misérables*, the musical. We got to see a great performance of this on Thursday evening. Our own Jesse Moyer played Enjolras, one of the main characters, and did a terrific job. It's such a moving story, and it was a moving experience to see these high schoolers perform it. If you're not familiar with the story, it's a story of redemption in the life of a man named Jean Valjean. He had been a prisoner for so many years because he had stolen bread to give to his sister's family who were starving. When he was finally released, and he

was trying to make a way for himself in the world, he was taken in by a bishop who showed him kindness and trust. Valjean took advantage of that trust, and robbed the bishop, fleeing in the night. The police brought him back, and the bishop, amazingly, told the police that he had given these things to Valjean as a gift. And he gave him the valuable candlesticks as well.

This mercy and grace changed Valjean's life. He went out into the world this time a different man. He sought to rescue Fantine from the desperate circumstances of her life. After Fantine died, Valjean raised her daughter, Cosette. And all this while inspector Javert was pursuing him, wanting to imprison him again for his past crimes. Like Uncle Tom and Simon Legree, the contrast between Valjean and Javert highlights the difference between perceived freedom and true freedom. Like Simon Legree, Javert had the law on his side, but he was bound by chains of his own making. Valjean, on the other hand, experienced freedom through sacrifice.

At the end of the story, after many twists and turns, Valjean is on his deathbed, Cosette and her husband are with him, and he is at peace. In the final scene, Fantine (Cosette's mother, who had passed away many years before), she appears and beckons Valjean to heaven. She sings,

“Come with me
Where chains will never bind you
All your grief
At last, at last behind you
Lord in Heaven
Look down on him in mercy.”
And Valjean responds,
“forgive me all my trespasses
And take me to your glory.”

That's a beautiful picture to me of the freedom we long for, which we will finally experience in all its fullness once we are with God in heaven. This fallen world is filled with chains that bind us and beckon us and pursue us. Don't you ache to go to that place in God's presence where chains will never bind you, where all your grief at last will be behind you? And it's because the Lord of heaven looks down on us in mercy and forgives us all our trespasses and will one day take us to His glory.

We've seen the already / not-yet nature of the kingdom of God, which Jesus seems to allude to in the way He quotes Isaiah 61. And we've seen these aspects of His ministry, that *by the power of the Holy Spirit He proclaimed* the Good News of *liberty* to the *captives*. Let us never forget that we were captives. Let us never forget that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ we now have liberty.

And let us be emboldened in the power of the Spirit to proclaim this Good News to others.