

Communicating the Gospel in a Pagan World

Isaiah 61

It has been an absolute joy and delight to be sharing with you these days, and seems as though I can't believe tomorrow night will be my final opportunity. I've been looking forward to these days. So many of you have stopped to tell me about your Scottish and your Irish heritage. I know that I am among friends. I was talking to Bobby Shaw today. Bobby can't decide whether it is Scottish or Irish. And I told them it didn't really matter because God's salvation suits everyone. It suits the English man because he can talk about it. It suits the Welshman because he can sing about it. It suits the Irish man because he can fight about it. And it suits the Scotsman because he gets it for nothing. So whichever region you come from, God's salvation is for you. It is multi-ethnic and international.

And if you have your Bibles with you, could you turn then to the prophecy of Isaiah and the 61st chapter?

The prophet says, 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, and to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes. The oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise. Instead of a 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 devastated nations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks. Foreigners will be your men and women dressers, 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 of Justice, I hate robbery and wrong. I will faithfully give them their recompense, and they 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. 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 a 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 will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations. Amen.

May God bless to us this reading of his precious word. You remember in the closing verses of his gospel, Luke records how Jesus commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses. We were thinking about that last evening, and then he led the right as far as Bethany, and he lifted up his

hands and blessing. And at that point something remarkable happened. Luke says while he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, blessing God. Commenting on those verses. Lastly, New Pagans says that mission begins with an explosion of joy. And you remember how Luke began his gospel at the coming of Christ? The angel announced, I bring you good tidings of great joy that will be for all the people. Did you hear that? Good news of great joy for everyone. Not just some joy or joy for some people, but joy for all the people. And as Jesus ascends, the disciples are filled with great joy, and we ought not to miss it. That the Gospel of Luke begins and ends with people rejoicing. The Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's such a huge and wonderful message in this sad, depressed, and broken world, and it's a calling of the Christian church to demonstrate and to display and to proclaim this wonderful joy. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote - In a world where everything has gone sadly astray, we should be standing out as man and woman apart. People characterized by a fundamental joy, uncertain day in spite of conditions and in spite of adversity. The first disciples were filled with great joy, and the first Christians living in a very difficult and a very hostile world stood out because God had given them a joy from beyond that world.

And of you will know the name of John Bunyan, whose book *The Pilgrim's Progress* was for many centuries the most published book.

Apart from the Bible. Bunyan died in London in August 1688, and at one point Bunyan was uncertain about his own salvation, and he felt quite depressed and quite sad. And then there was a time, he said, when he felt as though the Lord spoke to him directly, and the Lord said Bunyan, where is my son? And Bunyan replied, he is at your right hand. Oh, father. And the Lord said, can any thing move him from there? And Bunyan replied, of course not, O Lord. And the Lord said, neither can any one move you, for you are in my son. And it's that same assurance that they were united to their risen, undescended Lord, that fortified, that galvanized the early church, and gave them a deep seated hope and a joy that went beyond their circumstances and their situation, so that the Apostle Peter writes that the scattered and the dispersed Christian believers in the ancient world rejoiced with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

Recently, I was teaching a Doctor of Ministry seminar on the Westminster Standards with, our President, Dr. Peter Lillback. And Peter was pointing out the number of occasions in the Westminster standards that refer to joy. You'll think immediately of chapter ten on assurance. It's the duty of every one says the confession, to give all diligence to make his calling an election sure that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy, in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience.

And that is still God's gift to this sad and depressed world. Christ comes into the synagogue of Nazareth, announcing the start of his mission. And he's quoting from this passage in Isaiah 61. And he says that his mission is to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

He has come, he says, to anoint them with the oil of gladness, so that the Lord may be glorified. You remember Isaac, what's in his great hymn? Blessings abound. Where? There he reigns. The prisoner leaps to lose his chains. The weary find eternal rest. And all who suffer want our blessed. And Isaiah wants to inspire us with a vision of the ministry and the mission of the coming Messiah, so that we're ready to go to our needy world with this good news of great joy.

Let me say three things briefly. Firstly, gospel joy comes through the mission and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. These verses in Isaiah 61 tell us that Jesus was given the greatest anointing of the spirit in the history of the human race, and Isaiah describes Messiah as the man of the spirit par excellence. From the womb of Mary to the tomb of Joseph, to the throne of heaven.

The spirit was the constant companion of Messiah, and that anointing of the spirit was so that he might bring good news to the poor. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him, God loved the worst, this world and all its rebellion.

He gives the best his only begotten son. He asks the least that we believe, and he gives the most everlasting life. And here in Isaiah, Messiah announces all that it means for him to save us from condemnation. He uses seven infinitives to describe the mission and ministry of Jesus. Christ's ministry is saving people who are in trouble, people who are in bondage, people whose hearts are broken, who hasn't known trouble in their lives, whose heart hasn't been broken at some time or other, who hasn't felt lonely, forsaken or abandoned.

And in those difficult times, our hearts and emotions tell us that perhaps God has forgotten about us, or that even God has is against us. What have I done to deserve this? We ask, why do I have to endure such pain and difficulty in my life? Why does God allow this to happen to me and the ministry of Jesus in the gospel is to reassure us of God's grace, to take away all our guilty fears, to banish all our despair, and to replace it with a joy which is literally inexpressible.

And that transformation happens because he has the spirit, because the Lord has anointed him for this ministry, a ministry that brings life and joy and deep personal renewal. And how does he do it? He does it through the preaching of the gospel. The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives.

And the good news is that Christ has won the victory, that he has overcome everything that is against us, everything that robs us of our joy and our security. No matter your past failures, no matter your present weaknesses, no matter your lost opportunities, Jesus brings us a life so new, so different that we can hardly believe it's real.

And the clue to this new life, a new joy, have already has already been suggested here in the Old Testament. Because in Leviticus 25 we read about how God established the year of Jubilee after seven cycles of seven years. In the 50th year, there was to be a special celebration. All debts were canceled, family property that was sold was restored to its original owners.

There was a fresh and new attitude of kindness and generosity. The Lord said that liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land, and the blessings and the celebrations of the year of Jubilee were but a foreshadowing of the liberty that we have in Christ. That the blessings of the Year of Jubilee are fully and wonderfully realized through the gospel and the ministry of Messiah, that we're free to leave the past behind.

We can move forward with joy and relief that all our debts have been canceled, that there's restoration, that there is life, and that there's a reason to celebrate. And after Jesus reads these words from Isaiah 61, in the synagogue in Nazareth, he looks at the congregation and he says to them, today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

All the effects of sin in our lives are addressed in the ministry of Jesus and in the preaching of the gospel. And when the gospel is preached today in the power of the spirit under the Spirit's anointing, the prophecies of Isaiah 61 are being fulfilled in our hearing. Notice a difference between what Isaiah says in chapter 61 and what Jesus quotes in Nazareth.

In the synagogue, Isaiah writes, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. But Jesus doesn't include the second line of verse two. Why did he stop short of reading the whole verse? Well, the answer, of course, is that Jesus fulfills all the prophecies of the Old Testament, but he doesn't fulfill them all at the same time.

At his first coming, he inaugurated the year of the Lord's favor. At the Second Coming, he will bring the day of vengeance of our God, when the door of grace will be closed forever. And there's a gap between the first line of verse two and the second line of verse two. And right now we are living in that gap.

It's as though Isaiah is looking into the future, and he sees two great mountain peaks in the distance, one line beyond the other. And he describes both peaks, both mountains. But he can't see clearly the distance that lies between them. And then this interval, this gap. Jesus through his church is preaching the year of the Lord's favor. But the day of vengeance of our God is still to come in the future.

And through the gospel being preached, Messiah comforts all who mourn. He binds up the brokenhearted. He proclaims liberty to the captives. This is the mission of Jesus right now in our world and we join with Christ in that mission as we preach the gospel, as we share the Good news, as we call people to new life, a new joy, a new peace as they embrace Jesus Christ.

Freely offered in the gospel. Gospel joy, friends, comes through the mission and the ministry and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. But secondly, gospel joy comes as Christ brings restoration and renewal. Notice how the sadness and the mourning of the people is transformed by Messiah. In Babylon, the people were depressed. They were unable to sing. Hi, can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

We wept as we remembered Zion. But Isaiah describes how the ministry of Messiah will bring them into a new experience of joy instead of the ashes of mourning, he will give his people

beauty. Instead of mourning, he will give them the oil of joy instead of the spirit of heaviness. He will give his people the garment of praise.

And the result is that God's people are called oaks of righteousness. They grow strong, they're beautiful. They are glorious, firmly rooted in him. And there's the planting of the Lord. They glorify him. Isn't that what we long to see in our churches and in our fellowships? And even here, man and woman who are full of joy and praise and who are firmly rooted in Christ like mighty oaks, they can withstand the winds of opposition and oppression.

And in preaching the gospel they become agents of renewal. 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. And his commentary on this passage, Ray Auckland highlights the phrase the devastations of many generations. That really struck me because it's such an accurate and poignant description of our community life in Northern Ireland during my lifetime, we have personally experienced the devastations of many generations.

It's what sin does in our personal lives and in our community life. Sin creates victims and because of what they have suffered, some of those victims feel that they need to retaliate, and the retaliation only serves to create more sin and more victims. And it gets passed on from generation to generation. We expect the devastations of many generations, and as Christians, we recognize that our world is out of sorts.

This world is not as it should be. Neither are we. Since the fall of our first parents in the garden, sin has been spreading our culture of sadness and mourning and death in the terrorism, in the wars, in the almost daily murders in our communities. We're living in a culture of death. Add to that the number of babies being aborted every year and increasingly in the UK, the moves towards the legalization of assisted suicide.

We seem to be developing a dark culture that is full of sadness and destruction. As a society, we are denying life, we are promoting death and we are a radical hit in true joy. And what's the answer? We need a savior and the only person qualified in the whole history of the human race to save us is Jesus Christ.

He came to reverse the effects of the fall. He came to recreate a culture of life and joy and peace. And what is in view here is not just the physical devastation and pain of this world. Christ and the proclamation of the gospel inaugurates a new creation where the root causes of sin are addressed. And Isaiah's point in verse four is that people who have been liberated by the gospel become a creative force for restoration.

That is our mission. Verses five and six God says that mission is heroic. Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks. Forerunner shall be your plowman and vine dressers, 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.

And in verse seven, Isaiah highlights this mission of renewal and restoration, that it is full of joy. The key word in verse seven is instead, instead of your shame, there shall be a double portion instead of dishonor. They shall rejoice in their Lord. Therefore, their land. They shall possess a double portion. They shall have everlasting joy. Human attempts at salvation and liberation do nothing but create ruins and bring devastation.

While the mission of the church is to address the underlying cause of all the sadness and pain, and we believe that in the gospel, the human heart can be changed and transformed by God's Spirit and the history of Christian mission in the world is one where the gospel has brought hope and life and joy. And there are so many inspirational examples that we could quote this evening. Let me quote one David Livingstone was a Scottish physician. He was a missionary, slave, abolitionist and explorer who spent decades exploring and evangelizing Africa. He was also famous for his contribution to the abolition of the African slave trade. Livingstone was born on the 19th of March, 1813 in a town called Blantyre, near Glasgow in Scotland. When he was 21, he became interested in missionary work after reading a pamphlet that called for missionaries to go to China, especially those who had a medical background. So, he began studying medicine and theology in Glasgow with the intention of becoming a missionary doctor. In 1838, the London Missionary Society accepted Livingstone, but unfortunately they couldn't send him to China because of the First Opium War. But in God's providence, Livingstone met Robert Moffat, a Scottish missionary in southern Africa, who told them about Africa, and he described the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has been before and where the name of Jesus was not known. Livingstone got excited by this prospect, and in March 1841 he arrived in Cape Town in South Africa. He spent the next ten years moving through the interior of Africa to reach people with the Gospel of Christ and to free them from slavery, and it was only after his seventh year that Livingstone saw his first convert. He gave himself unreservedly to the cause of mission in Central Africa, and he once wrote back to his sister Agnes in Scotland and they said God had only one son and he was a missionary.

In May 1873, Livingstone took his last breath while kneeling in prayer at his bedside. The servants who found him removed his heart from his chest and burned it. In Africa, and the remainder of his body was interred in Westminster Abbey on the 15th of April, 1874. If you go to Westminster Abbey, you can see his tombstone. It says missionary, traveler, philanthropist.

For 30 years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize the native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets, to abolish the desolate in the slave trade of Central Africa, where, with his last words, he wrote, all I can add in my solitude is May heaven's rich blessing come down and everyone who will help to heal this open sore of the world.

And why would men like Livingstone invest their lives in preaching the gospel and in working for justice? Because they understood who God is and what the gospel means? For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrong, and justice means more than putting things right legally. It means the way human life and human society are meant to be.

God loves shalom, human wholeness, human health, and the robbery and the injustice and the evil of this world is a distortion of who we are meant to be. And as we commit ourselves to this gospel ministry of renewal and restoration, we have the assurance that God commits himself to us. We are richly blessed as we do so. Verses 89I will faithfully give them their recompense.

I will make an everlasting covenant with them all who see them acknowledge them, that they are on the offspring. The Lord has blessed. And the final demonstration of God's grace and faithfulness will be an everlasting covenant, which he will make with his people, in which every promise he has ever made will be fulfilled, and the whole world will wonder at his grace so powerfully displayed in them.

And that results in a note of praise and thanksgiving and rejoicing. A large, clear voice ringside, I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul shall exult to my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness. The same Lord who has set him right will one day set the whole world right.

Gospel joy comes as Christ brings restoration and renewal. One final thought gospel joy comes as we are persistent and faithful in prayer. There's a challenge that comes to us in the next chapter. Chapter 62. If you have your Bibles, you can look at verses six and seven on your walls of Jerusalem. I have sent watchmen all the day and all the night.

They shall never be silent. You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem, and makes it a praise in the earth. You and I, we are like watchmen. We're like sentries posted on the city wall, keeping our eyes peeled for what God's doing in our world. And as we look at it, and as we watch, we encourage one another with the reports of what's happening and how God's kingdom is advancing.

But we also speak to God. We pray without ceasing, and the language that the prophet uses here is quite remarkable. We give God no rest until a revived and restored church astonishes the world, and God has positioned us in our generation to pray for the advance of the gospel and the kingdom of Christ. And the scriptures repeatedly give us examples of prevailing prayer.

Jesus compared prayer to a man pounding and pounding on his neighbor's door late at night, until eventually the neighbor gets up and helps him. Jim says that the prayer of a righteous man has great power as it is working. Otto Helsby was a Norwegian theologian who resisted the Nazis during the Second World War. He wrote a book on prayer, which was standard reading for many young Christians.

A generation ago, as I was growing on up, it was on every university, Christian union, book, table and house. We said that prayer is a bit like mining. In prayer. We are boring holes deep into the rock of hard human hearts, and that's difficult. And it is hard work, and it requires much patience, and the results are often invisible to us.

But in God's time, he inserts the dynamite, he lights the fuse, and the rocks begin to crumble. And we must be steady and persistent and determined to keep praying. You'll see in your

brochure for this conference that Brian has mentioned a number of books that you might want to read, and amongst them he mentions George Mueller, widely considered to be the greatest, one of the greatest men of prayer, and the fifth since the days of the New Testament. He lived nearly the entire 19th century, two thirds of it in Bristol in England. He led far reaching influential ministries, but we know him best for his orphanages. During a time in England when most orphans lived in miserable workhouses or on the streets like Charles Dickens Oliver Twist, Miller took them in, he fed them. He closed them, he educated them. And through his orphanage in Bristol, Mueller cared for as many as 2000 orphans at a time. More than 10,000 in his lifetime. Yet he never made the needs of his ministries known to anyone except to God in prayer, and only through his annual reports did people learn after the fact what the needs had been during the previous year and how God had provided.

The Watchmen are not critics. The Watchmen are prayer warriors who constantly prayer pray. They give God no rest until God's people and his city are restored. Charles Spurgeon wrote, A restless Savior calls upon his people to be restless and to make the Lord himself restless, to give him no rest till his chosen city is full of splendor, his chosen church complete and glorious.

May the joy of Christ abound in our hearts as we focus on the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Christ who brings restoration and renewal. And they, our gospel joy, be increased, manifold as we are persistent and faithful in prayer that spray.

Lord, we give you thanks for this clear injunction from your word to give you no rest until all your purposes are accomplished. And so, Lord, we pray that not only will you give us a fountain of joy in our hearts that constantly springs up but give to us the spirit of intercession and of prayer, so that as we seek your face, we see your hand at work, in the transformation and in the renewal of your church and your world. In Jesus name we pray.

Amen.