

The Gospel of God

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Date: 29 August 2021

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, where to begin? What do you say at the beginning of a new chapter in the life of this, our church? It's a question that I've turned over many times in my head the past few weeks.

Is it time for a new vision or plan or bullet point list of priorities? Is it time for a new big picture of what we could be about and what we could do over the next few years?

Well, that, I think, is the temptation for us this morning, for me speaking and for yourselves listening, to come and wonder what I, a new minister, can come and say or do the same or differently from what has been said or done before.

But I chose this passage we're coming to this morning because it blows out of the water what I could come and say or do.

Because in these words, in these pages, we hear God say what he has come to do. You see that in verse 2, what does God say?

[1 : 13] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.

God says, it's over, our debt is settled. He has done it. And see that question that Isaiah asks in verse 6, that same question.

What shall I say? What shall I come and say? What shall I cry? Well, the answer comes, say what God says. Say what God says.

Do you notice how many voices there are in this passage proclaiming, verse 2? Calling, verse 3.

Crying out, verse 6. Lifted up, verse 9.

What are all these chorus of voices saying to us? Well, we see it there, verse 9. Here is your God. Here is your God.

[2 : 13] Come in power to save. What you heard God say, say that. We, the people, says Isaiah, are grass. But the word of our God endures forever.

And what's really exciting about this is notice what God's message is called in verse 9. Twice. What is it called?

Good news. Good news. That's the first time that we find that phrase used in that way in our Bibles. One of the first times.

In a way, this is the beginning of the gospel. Perhaps that is a surprise to us this morning that we would open the book of Isaiah and find the gospel of God.

But this morning as we spend time in this passage, God's word, God himself wants us to take in the glory of this gospel, the glory of the good news.

[3 : 15] And to join in with these voices, the voices of his people down through the ages in telling out what he has come and done.

Now that is exciting. I hope you're excited about that. I'm excited. The beginning of something is exciting. But friends, let us together hear this morning what God says his plan is.

What does he want us to see? What does he want us to say? Well, firstly then, let us be comforted by God's gospel.

Comforted by God's gospel. You see that in verse 1? Comfort. Comfort my people, says your God. Now, maybe some of you could sing those words this morning.

If you're familiar with Handel's Messiah, it's a musical tour de force about the promise and coming and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 16] And Handel chose that verse from Isaiah to open that great musical hit. I won't sing them. I won't sing them. But they are brilliant lines to begin with, aren't they?

Because they capture God's purpose for speaking good news to us. God's gospel is designed to comfort and strengthen, to lift up and give life to those who believe in his words.

Notice it's a repeated word, comfort. Comfort. Yeah, that's a classic Hebrew way of highlighting and underlining and putting in bold whatever is repeated.

and here it's that word comfort. You know, I wonder if that is what we expect to receive when we come to God's Word. When we think of our Bible reading plan, our Bible in a year, or whatever it is you use, when we think of coming to church on a Sunday, do we get a shot of happy endorphins? Do we get the thought that we get to come and hear God speak words to us that give us life? Or instead, I wonder, do we get the kind of adrenaline rush of worry? Does the thought of what God might have to say to us stress us out? Perhaps you don't know where you stand this morning, and to you the Bible just seems like a book that's written to beat you up or to tell you off.

Well, it's helpful for us then to know that that's the kind of thing that God's people expected to hear from God back when this was written. If you're wondering why Isaiah writes about comfort in chapter 40, it's because we've just had 39 chapters of a roller coaster of dark and light. You know, light has shone through at points, but the big picture, the canvas, has been very, very dark. Isaiah has spent years holding out hope to a nation that turned away from God again and again and again. God said, trust me, and they trusted in foreign superpowers. God said, trust me, and they trusted in their own strength. And after decades and after centuries of this backwards and forwards, God sends Isaiah to say, enough is enough. The people are going away. They would be defeated by the kingdom of Babylon, and they would be in exile away from God. And so, when Isaiah opens his mouth in chapter 40, that's what's happening. His people are in deep, suffering the consequences of centuries of sin.

[7 : 14] In the words of one writer, they're people whose whole world has been shattered. They are far from home, living mainly as an underclass in Babylonian society and a long, long way from God. So, I wonder what they expected to hear from God. What would we expect? Anger, perhaps even worse, disappointment, but not comfort. As I reflected on this passage, it seemed to me that chapter 40 of Isaiah is a bit like a child having a meltdown at home and being sent to sit on the naughty step. And dad comes. And dad comes. And the child hears dad's footsteps coming, coming, coming. And the child is expecting the telling off of his life. And dad comes. And he opens his mouth and says, I love you. You've had enough now. It's finished. Come back. It's okay. You imagine the shock of a nation hearing those words of comfort from the one that they had so angered, comfort my people.

You know, friends, as Christians today, I wonder, do we still fear words of disapproval from God? Do we still fear his disappointment with our lives or his anger at our sins?

Do we still fear his disappointment with our sins? Do we still fear his disappointment with our sins? This chapter reminds us this morning that the Bible is not here to beat us up, but to give life to those who trust God's words. Later, Isaiah will say of Jesus, a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not snuff out.

But it is a fair question, isn't it? How can that be right? Given our sin, the ways that we have and still do push back against God, how can that be right? But that is the wonder, isn't it, of what God says in verse 2. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed. Her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand, double for all her sins. Did you notice those words, completed, paid for, settled? We might say the sin is dealt with in full. You know, I find it hard to read those lines without hearing the voice of Jesus from the cross, saying, it is finished. Those last great words that he breathed with his final breath, carrying on his shoulders the sins of everyone who ever had or ever would trust in him and his work, our sins are settled. The sentence has been served, says God. And he would come to see to it in person.

That's what those next verses are saying, verses 3 to 5. The voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. God is coming.

[10 : 44] It's a strange image for us, this great big road that runs through the middle of the desert. I think the closest we can get is the idea of rolling out a red carpet for someone really important to walk down. But the ancient version of the red carpet was a special road that they would build for a king to come down with his armies, with all his pageantry and parade to show off his power and glory and wealth after a victory. See, this is no ordinary road or red carpet. It is a road for God to come down, prepare the way for the Lord, a highway for our God, and like a king would show off his victory, verse 5, on this road would the glory of the Lord be revealed.

God coming in person for our rescue, to see it done, to see our sin paid for, to see our sentence served. That's what Isaiah is saying. And so is it any wonder that the next time we hear this voice

crying out in our Bibles is to get ready for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Listen to the start of Mark's gospel, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as it's written in Isaiah the prophet. Behold, I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Verse 9, in those days Jesus came. Jesus came, Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God walked down that road prepared so many years before to save us from our sins. His glory was seen by the world, not in his pageantry, not in his wealth and power, but in his death on a cross. For as we sing it sometimes, for on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. In his own words, it is finished.

The question for these people back then is, how could 70 years of exile, a lifetime away, how could that have paid for hundreds and hundreds of years of sin? Well, Isaiah's answer is that of course it didn't. As he would write 13 chapters later of the servant of the Lord, he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace. His sins was on him. By his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. This is the promise, the reality of the gospel. Our God has come to save us from our sin. And so the question is, hundreds and thousands of years later in this church building on this Sunday morning, have we taken this in?

[14:08] Do we dare to believe it? Does it not sound too good to be true? God knows that we struggle. That phrase in verse 2, speak tenderly. In Hebrew, literally, is speak to the heart. God would speak to our hearts today. God wants us to be convinced by that good news.

God would have us know and believe in here that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He would have us believe that when we open our Bibles bleary-eyed in the morning or before we go to bed at night, that he speaks to comfort us and not to crush us. He would persuade each of us, his people today, by his word that our sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross and we bear it no more. There is no leftover guilt that we carry before him. And he speaks this tenderly to our hearts this morning because we need his help even to believe that that might be true.

Sometimes people say that the biggest struggle for Christians is to come to terms with God's judgment. And that might be true kind of up here intellectually. I wonder if actually the biggest struggle for Christians, for us ourselves, in our hearts is to come to terms with God's love.

Let me say and speak to you, if you haven't yet trusted in Jesus for this rescue, that this good news is for you this morning, that the good news is big enough for you, whoever you are, and whatever you have done or haven't done, if you would trust him for it, his rescue is yours.

Let's let the gospel speak comfort to our hearts today. And then secondly, let us speak out that gospel as we go out. Secondly, God calls us to confidently speak out his gospel.

[16:25] See that call in verse 6? A voice says, cry out. Cry out. It's as if the voice in verse 3 is trying to get more voices to join in the chorus of God's good news as it spreads out through the land.

And that call, cry out. It comes down through the ages to us today. But instead of just telling, instructing his people to go and share the gospel, notice God works through it with us.

The call comes and Isaiah says, what shall I cry? In a way, it's obvious, isn't it? He's here to say what we have just heard, what God has said to us. But sometimes we need convincing that that really is the task at hand and that the good news is actually worth going and telling. You perhaps, for Isaiah, in the face of his nation's seemingly never-ending sin, he needed reminding that what God says is still worth saying. It's still needed said. And so, as the answer to that question, what shall I say? We have this picture painted for us in verse 7. All people are like grass, all their faithfulness like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flower falls because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely, the people are grass. You assume we are going to see the leaves start to change, aren't we, on the trees and fall away. Grassy fields today will become muddy fields in a few more months. It was only a few months ago, wasn't it, that the leaves came out and the trees turned green. And a few more months and it will seem like it never happened at all.

Here today, gone tomorrow, we are like that, says the voice. It's sobering, yes, in the sense of our time here on earth. Psalm 90, we read the years of our life are 70, maybe 80, and are soon gone. But maybe harder still for us. Isaiah is saying the people are like grass in the sense of our faithfulness. See that, all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The word there, apologies if

it feels like you're getting a Hebrew lesson, but the word there is hesed. Hesed, it's a word worth knowing because it's the Hebrew word for covenant love, steadfast love, often used of God himself and his love. And isn't that just what Isaiah has seen as his people's love for God has withered and fallen away like a cut flower?

[19 : 17] And if you were Isaiah watching that, would you not be wondering, what can I say to that? What is left for me to cry out in the face of such unfaithfulness? Well, yes, says God, all people are like grass and flowers inside and out, but there is something worth saying that lasts longer than us and that has power to change lives. See that verse 8, the grass withers, the flower falls, but the word of our God endures forever.

What shall I cry out? Well, says God, my word will outlive you and it works in a world of sin. It's not hard for us to feel maybe sometimes a bit defeated. Perhaps like Isaiah, we see our world going the wrong way and wonder what on earth we can say to that. Maybe we feel lost for words. Or maybe we know the words, but have stopped trusting that they will even scratch the surface of the problem. What shall I cry? Well, comes the reply, the word of our God endures forever. In the pictures that hang in the office behind me is a picture of a man named Duncan Leach. Somebody was telling me all about him recently. His ministry here at Bon Accord finished in 1940. [20 : 51] Now, some of you might know the name. Some of you might have remembered the man. But I doubt, I highly doubt that any of you sitting here today were sitting here when Duncan Leach was preaching in this church. Okay, correct me if I'm wrong. I'm treading on dangerous ground, maybe.

But in 80 years, okay, the church has changed. Nobody who heard the word then hears it here today in this church now. The only thing that is still here in this church from 1940 is God's word. 80, 100, 200, 500 years on, God's word is being heard. Today, I'm the new minister. One day, I hope many years from now, I will be the old minister. But God's word will still be here speaking. One day, we will not be here. There will be another church. But God's word will still be here. And so what could be more worthwhile in the short time that we are here than speaking God's word, saying what God says? Yes, there is sin out there. Yes, there is sin in here. But we don't have to come up with something new to say to that problem, because God's word was at work long before we got here, and will continue to be at work long after we are gone. And so look what we are to do with God's word in verse 9. You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up. Do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. We are to bring this good news without fear, to shout it from the rooftops, so to speak. What started in this passage with God's voice, voice? Then a voice, then Isaiah's voice, now becomes the hundreds of voices of people who have been rescued on their way back to Jerusalem. They have been set free from hard service, from the sins that sent them there. Now they are running back on that great highway, that great road, and shouting out when they get home, he has done it. Look at your God. Look what he has done for us. Isaiah calls them evangelists, those who bring good news. In the ancient world, this is just how big news had to travel. Someone had to take it to where it had to go. Messengers would run home from the battlefield from a victory to tell everyone, our guys have won. We're free. They've done it. And in the ancient world, it was called a gospel, the news of victory, of being saved, of someone coming home to tell everyone about it. Now, when Isaiah speaks of bringing good news to Zion, to Jerusalem, the towns of Judah, he's looking at a future day when God will have come to the rescue and sent everyone home to tell all people about it, what he has done. And if what we were thinking about earlier is true, and it is true, that Jesus has indeed come to save us from our sins, that he has put us right with God, if our sin is finished and that is true of us today, then boy, do we have good news to share here at home and out in the world? Listen to 1 Peter 2 9. He writes, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

[25 : 05] We have this message that lasts forever, this good news. And if we have taken it in and believed it, how can we not take it out and speak it? We can think of it a bit like breathing, maybe. If we have breathed in the gospel, how can we help but breathe out the gospel?

So two ways as we close that we share the good news. Notice the first, that the good news comes to Jerusalem. It comes first to God's people. Now this is obvious but still worth saying, I think, that the gospel isn't just what people out there need to hear. It's what we in here need to hear also.

The good news is not step one in a 10-step program for spiritual life. It is steps zero to ten. Okay, that's not to say that there's nothing to grow into, that there's no solid meat for us to chew on. But if the good news is not the air that we breathe as a church, then we can be eating sirloin steaks every day and still die because we'll suffocate, because we're not breathing that gospel air. And so as Paul writes to the Ephesians, as he encourages them, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. The gospel, the truth, is for us to speak into one another's lives in love so that we all grow up and mature in Christ.

So I hope you come on a Sunday expecting to hear about Jesus. But let me encourage you to also come on a Sunday expecting to speak about Jesus too. Okay, I can speak to you about Jesus, but Paul is saying, let us all be speaking about Jesus to one another as he gives us opportunity on a Sunday at Bible study, over coffee, at the dinner table, at home. Yes, the Lord opens doors for his word. Let us speak it. You wouldn't it be wonderful in the years to come for our church to resound with the name of Jesus? But it doesn't stop at the doors of our church, does it? Look, it goes out first to Jerusalem, then to the towns of Judah, out into the land, into, we might say, the highways and byways. See, if we're speaking about Jesus here among ourselves, it will be far more natural for us to speak about the Lord Jesus to others who don't yet know him. Some people are especially gifted at that. We are not all equally kind of up for it or know what to say.

I know I compared earlier to breathing. I know personally it's not that natural. Breathing is very natural. Talking about the Lord Jesus doesn't come as naturally. But Isaiah says here, if we have been rescued by God, then we are evangelists, bringers of good news. And so this week, something to ask yourself is, who do I know that I could start speaking to about Jesus? Or ratcheting it down a little bit, who do I know who I might be able to invite to church? Or even further, who do I know who I might be able to get together with some Christian friends? Where are the opportunities?

[28 : 56] Where are the open doors for God's word? Where are we praying to see God open hearts to receive Jesus? When we wonder what we can say or do to help a lost friend or family member or neighbor, where God says, my word stands forever. His word is what we can bring. Because he alone has the words of eternal life. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. And as we go, just look again. Just look at the God that we get to point people to in verse 10. See, see the sovereign Lord comes with power. He rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him. His recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young. God rolls up the sleeves of his all-powerful arms to carry us, his people, close to his heart. One writer says he will come with the strength of a warrior and with the tenderness of a shepherd. He would use his incredible strength, the power with which he created the heavens and the earth to rescue us who had wandered away from him in sin. And the call comes, verse 10, see him.

See him. Where do we look to see him? Where do we point people to see God? Well, says Jesus, I am the good shepherd. I am the good shepherd. And the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The Lord of all power used his authority to die to sinners like me and you so that we would be his and he would be ours. And God's message to us today, brothers and sisters, is see him. Here is your God clothed in the gospel, mighty to save. Do you see him? Let's pray together.

God, our Father, we thank you for your grace towards us, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, we thank you for him, our good shepherd, he who laid down his life for us, he who carries us close to his heart. We worship you, our God, for you have freed us from slavery to sin. You have freed us from fear of death. Perhaps above all, you have freed us from fear of yourself, from hiding from you. That we might know you and live with you and walk with you, to trust you.

[32 : 12] We thank you that you have given us the great gift of yourself and relationship with you. And so we pray that you would stir our hearts and give us joy, that we might go from here today overflowing with thankfulness to you and that that would be seen in our lives as we speak about your rescue to one another and to those who as yet do not know you. We pray that in your sovereign grace, you would be at work in the hearts of many to bring them to yourself, people as yet whom we don't know, but who are known to you. And we ask, Lord, that you would make them yours, for we ask in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.