

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, the things we do each day fill our minds completely, or so it seems, and we find it hard to give You the space to do those works of grace You long to do in us. So come to us in a moment, unexpectedly, and let the Spirit lift our bound souls above our worldly anxieties to heavenly places of joy and wonder, love and praise. Take us there, dear Jesus, at any time of Your choosing and at every instant of our need; and may our lives give testimony to the transforming power of even just a moment spent with You. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Pray today in silence. Give no agenda to the Lord, just let His Word flow over you and wait upon Him*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for your family.** *Pray for any members of your extended family who are ill, perhaps chronically ill. Pray for relief from disease and illness within your entire family*
- *Give thanks to God for the many people that God has saved today, from their sins, from sickness and distress, or from danger*
- *Pray about the problems of political scandal, and why they exist within your country. Pray against the demonic temptations of power that can all too often disrupt proper and peaceful government*

## Meditation

The breath of God has breathed in me,  
and by the grace of God, I am:

Once sin had grasped my heart and soul,  
the tempter's voice had whispered;  
Truth and justice found me out,  
my scales were never balanced!

My plight was clear, without a doubt  
my death was coming slowly;  
But glory be! by grace and faith,  
My Christ was there to save me!

So now repentance fills my soul,  
the Spirit breathes forgiveness;  
Confession stirs within my heart,  
I rejoice in the Father's kindness;

Mercy flows throughout my veins,  
the life-blood of my being;  
And love is made God's fruit in me,  
With faith and hope and caring.

The breath of God has breathed in me,  
and by the grace of God, I am.

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 61:1-4

- <sup>1</sup> 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 broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;
- <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;
- <sup>3</sup> to settle those who mourn in Zion,  
to give them flowers instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
- Then, they will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD to show His glory!
- <sup>4</sup> They will build up ancient wastelands,  
they will raise up former ruins;  
they will repair deserted cities,  
the devastation of past generations.

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## Bible Study

### Review

Most Christians know this wonderful passage of Isaiah, because it is the famous text chosen and read by Jesus when He stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-20). It is therefore an essential text for our understanding of the work of the Messiah in the Old Testament, not just because Jesus Himself chose it to describe His ministry, but also because it clearly stands at the heart of Isaiah's prophecies of the glorious work of the Servant, known more commonly as the Messiah. In recent studies, we have read Isaiah's vision of the glorious coming of the Lord as light into a dark world (chapter 60); but now, the one speaking is the suffering Servant of Isaiah's great vision of redemption (52:13-53:12). He is also the child 'Immanuel' born to be king (7:14, 9:6, 11:2), and the one who will 'feed His flock like a shepherd' (40:11). As Isaiah's prophecies draw to an end, all his hopes and aspirations for the work of the Lord combine in this clear and precise declaration of the mission of God's Messiah on earth.

All Christians are struck by the connection between this passage and the ministry of Jesus, who did indeed preach to the poor (Matt 5:1-11 etc), heal the sick (Matt 8:1f. 10:1f. etc.) and set people free (Matt 8:28f., 15:29-31 etc.). His life changed the world forever so that through Him, people could indeed access God's favour, and His life and death brought God's clear and defining judgement of sin and evil into the world (61:2). There is no doubt that Jesus believed His life's work was in fulfilment of this passage of scripture as well as others. However, we should not react to this scripture just by jumping forwards to see its fulfilment in our Lord. In a remarkable way, this passage is also the summary of everything Isaiah has said previously about the glorious work of God through His Servant.

Fundamentally, God's work of redemption is 'good news for the poor' (60:1). God's priority for the poor is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. The prophets speak forthrightly about injustice and rejection of God by the people of Israel in ancient times, but only Isaiah was given a clear and systematic picture of what God would do about human sin and how this would be overcome. He saw the collapse of the states of Israel and Judah, together with the consequence of such invasion and exile. He also foresaw the poverty of God's people (3:5, 52:4 etc.), the destruction of Jerusalem and the land (10:5-11, 31:9, 44:26 etc.), and the mourning of God's people for everything they lost when they were taken into captivity (3:26, 22:12 etc.). Isaiah was also given a call to prophecy in which God told him that neither he nor the people of Israel could do anything about their sins (6:9-13). Isaiah, from his earliest prophecies (7:14) perceived that God alone would work in sovereign power through one chosen by Him as a King (9:6, 11:2) and as a Servant (42:1f. and 53) to restore liberty and freedom not only to His people but to all people; He alone would be the Saviour of the world through this king and Servant! All of these themes from the prophecies of Isaiah and from the life of God's people Israel are summed up in today's passage.

With great zeal and enthusiasm, Isaiah announces the words of the Lord's Servant; 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me' (60:1)! Now we have already learned from Isaiah about the suffering of this Servant by which God would redeem people from sin (52:13-53:12), but with this incredible and difficult fact revealed, all that is left is for Isaiah to announce the benefits of this redemption in full, and this is the announcement! Not only will

the Servant liberate people from their past (61:1), but He will bring restoration to those who have suffered, and bless them with joy and celebration (61:2,3). He will also build up a new city for His people, restoring what was ruined by 'past generations (61:4)! This is God's 'Good News', His 'Gospel'!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The announcement of redemption
- The commission
- The meaning of redemption and evangelism
- The consequences

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V1 *'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me'***

There is no solid reason to change the traditional translation of this passage, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that the Hebrew places two words for God together, 'adonay' (Lord) and 'JHWH' (God). It was usual for Israelites to avoid saying the holy name JHWH, and people would replace this in normal speech with 'adonay' meaning 'Lord', in this instance therefore, saying 'the Lord' twice! In addition, it is quite possible (grammatically) for the first 'adonay' to mean 'my Lord', and some have suggested that this should be translated; 'The Spirit of my Lord, the Lord, is upon me'. Christians however, have always been content to say 'God' when referring to the holy name of God JHWH, so the only alternative to the traditional translation is 'the Spirit of my Lord God is upon me.' However, the subject of the use of the Lord's name in scripture is substantial, and needs to be discussed separately from this passage alone, so it is not worth changing the traditional translation here.

### **V1 *'The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me ...'***

Although when you read this it sounds familiar, be careful about the punctuation you find in different translations! Some prominent versions prefer to place a colon at the end of 'the Lord has anointed me', and this makes for a translation which reads; 'the Lord has anointed me: He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim ...' which is quite different! The truth is that the grammar of the Hebrew is correct either way! I have given this translation because of the theological and literary point that the phrase 'bring good news to the poor' is a general phrase covering all that follows, and therefore reflects the nature of the anointing (see study)

### **V3 *'to settle those who mourn in Zion.'***

The normal translations you will find say 'to comfort those who mourn ...' However, the Hebrew word here is 'to place' or 'to set', and indicates that the Lord will give a place to those who have lost everything, in Zion. I prefer to keep close to the original meaning of the verb with this translation, because we can work out what it means quite easily from this.

### **V3 *'to give them flowers instead of ashes'***

There is some controversy about the true meaning of the word for 'flowers', with some suggesting it is a turban, or a garland, or simply 'beauty'. The Hebrew contains a beautiful piece of poetic expression 'per tachat eper' in which the word for 'flowers' ('per') matches that for ashes ('eper'). For this reason, we should not be too worried about the exact translation because it is a matter of rhythm and poetry rather than literary correctness.

## Going Deeper

There are three parts to this wonderful text, and each deserves our fullest attention. The initial announcement 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me ...' (60:1), and then the specific commission of the Servant Redeemer; 'He has sent me to ...' (60:1,2). Lastly, the consequences of the Servant's work is identified; "Then, they will be called "oaks of righteousness" ..." (60:3).

### ***The announcement of redemption***

When Isaiah speaks the vision; 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...' we know that something important is happening. We know that the people of Israel regarded the Spirit of God as being present in a prophet (1 Sam 10:10f., 1 Kings 18:12 etc.), but here, Isaiah is not claiming the Spirit's inspiration for his own prophetic message, rather, he has a vision which is so powerful, it is difficult to put into words, even today. The words themselves are inspirational, but the explanation of them is something else! The 'Spirit' (Hebrew 'ruach', or 'breath') is the same Spirit identified within the Old Testament as breathing on the waters at the beginning of

Creation (Genesis 1:2). There is no explanation of the nature of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament; the Spirit is the agent of God, effective in the world by creating man and woman out of the 'dust' of the ground (Genesis 2:7); working both in people (as in the judges and the prophets – Judges 3:10f. 2 Kings 2:9 etc.) and also working independently in the natural world (Job 20:3, Psalm 51:11, Isaiah 4:4 etc.). Nevertheless, in the Old Testament after the Creation, the Holy Spirit seems to come and go according to the work of God's hands in the world. We have to await the Spirit's work through the Messiah, Jesus Christ, before He is released into the world at Pentecost to work tirelessly for the Kingdom of God like a 'wind that blows where it will' (John 3:8).

The announcement that the Spirit of the Lord is on the Servant, for it is He who speaks here in Isaiah's vision (otherwise the whole vision does not make sense), is remarkable because we already know the suffering work of redemption to be done by the Servant (53). People even today argue about the suffering of the Servant and His abandonment by God the Father, without remembering that the Spirit is with Jesus. We have so little insight into the inner workings of God, it is hard for us to understand these things. However, we should at least recognise that as we grapple with what it means for God to work in redemption through the Servant (Jesus), we can do no less than speak about God as Lord (or Father), as the Servant (that is, Jesus), and as the Holy Spirit. This, remarkably, is the language of the Trinity in the Old Testament! Scholars have ways of running rings around any definitions we try to produce about the relationship between God, the Servant and the Spirit, but if we do not recognise that this is what Isaiah is talking about, then little of this passage makes sense. As with so much of the theology we read in the New Testament, one who has read the Old Testament thoroughly can say 'you read it first in Isaiah!'

God's work of redemption is encapsulated in the Servant's mission to 'bring good news to the poor' (60:1), and because of the earthly nature of the Servant's work and His being 'given' to the world by God Himself (42:1-9), the Servant must be anointed. We must not think of anointing as merely a spiritual device, however. A study of anointing in the Old Testament shows that it has important earthly and public effects. Anointing is necessary so that people see God at work, as when a king is anointed by a prophet. A king must put that anointing into effect (see, for example, the life of David – 1 Samuel 16f.) by doing what God requires and gaining the acclamation of the people, so that they are able to perceive God at work and give Him thanks and praise. Anointing is a sign of the connection between earth and heaven, it is a commission from God for a special task, and it is also empowerment by the Spirit for that task.

When Jesus went to the Jordan river to be baptised, He was anointed by the Holy Spirit who came on Him in the form of a dove and in the words of God the Father (Matt 3:13-17). In that moment He connected spiritually to the anointing of the Servant, described here uniquely in Isaiah 61, so that God's work of redemption through Him could begin. Such was the power of His anointing.

### ***The commission***

At this point, we know the broad definition of the good news of God, which is to 'bring God news to the poor', and in this prophecy of commission, this phrase is now explained in the rest of verse 1, and verses 2 and 3. The explanation begins; 'He has sent me ...' There is no question that the evangelical dynamic of the work of God in the world is defined here in the Old Testament. Jesus of course gave this command to the disciples after His resurrection (Matt 28:19), but His commission simply passed on to the disciples what God had first given Him. The New Testament explains the 'Good News' of Jesus Christ in many different ways, but it never departs from the basis found here in Isaiah, and it would be good if every evangelist was familiar with this text.

The first group of tasks is profoundly practical but also spiritual; 'to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners'. It is impossible to suggest merely that Isaiah's words simply refer to practical help given to bruised and broken Jews in exile seeking to rebuild Jerusalem. Jeremiah, Ezra and Nehemiah all realised that those who needed help at this critical time in Israel's history needed spiritual help to understand what God was doing with them and why. Moreover, they needed the liberation of being released from those bondages of religiosity that prevented them from knowing that God was indeed with them in the midst of their troubles. How much more are we entitled to see in these words a prophecy of the redeeming work of God by the Servant, making redemption effective in the lives of people so that they are set at liberty both spiritually and practically. This is what Paul meant by 'evangelism', and putting this into practice was what created the early church of God.

### ***The meaning of redemption and evangelism***

Moreover, there are a thousand ways to interpret the particular phrases used here in the last three lines of verse 1. Some believe they reflect the healing and deliverance ministry of Jesus, which they do. Others suggest they reflect the practical ministry of help to people in distress and the genuine liberty of people held in slavery or political bondage, which they do; and we might add that they are the inspiration for Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes, which they may well be. However, the clear test of what they mean is the life and ministry of Jesus. He did heal and deliver people from demons, and He liberated people from all kinds of

practical bondages, including breaking down barriers between Jews and Gentiles and men and women (see John 4) for example, and He undoubtedly referred directly and indirectly to this passage on many occasions (Matt 10:1f., Luke 4:16f. Mark 16:15f. etc.). We should not limit the power of God by our own interpretation of so complex a text; but rather be glad that it opens up the meaning of the 'good news' of God through Jesus Christ, our Servant.

All the other aspects of the commission follow on from this. The release of the Servant into this ministry is likened to the 'year of the Lord's favour', a phrase which enables us to make a link with Leviticus and the whole concept of the Jubilee, the fiftieth year of favour when debts were cancelled and property was restored to its original tribal and family roots in Israel (Lev 25:10f. 27:17f.). The purpose of Jubilee was to restore God's authority to the people and the land, and re-establish His beneficial rule, but Jubilee was only a foretaste of the work of redemption. Isaiah knew very well that the complete work of redemption would come at a cost, and that cost is 'the day of vengeance of our God'. The good news of redemption carries with it the judgement of God on all evil and wrong doing; how can it be anything less. How can people be released from bondage and set free except from whatever has held them? Judgement and redemption go hand in hand.

The remaining vision of the good news of redemption in verses 2 and 3 are pictures of joy and elation! The explanation of the good news may be complicated and expansive, but anyone who has experienced true freedom and release from oppression or mourning will know that the feeling of liberty is true, inexpressible and unrestrained joy; 'the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of despair'!

### ***The consequences***

Lastly, Isaiah was led to use pictures he had used previously to ensure that the consequences of redemption and the work of the Servant would be clearly evident on the world stage. You may remember from our discussion of Isaiah 57 that 'oaks' were reminiscent of religiously deviant behaviour, but here, Isaiah is content to use the term openly to show the power of God's redemption. Instead of oaks of shame (1:29, 57:5), the people would become 'oaks of righteousness'! The Servant is able to go into enemy territory and claim it back; what is wrong with oaks that they should be tarred with the image of pagan worship? The Lord claims them as His own as a unilateral act, as it were, of religious 'Jubilee'! Further, the Lord declares these same oaks as His own planting, speaking of them as the 'planting of the Lord' and reminding of us of countless images throughout Isaiah of 'shoots' and young plants (6:13, 11:1), notably saying of the Servant; 'He grew up before Him like a young plant ...' (53:2).

Then, Isaiah could hardly fail to use the picture of 'rebuilding the city' (61:4), and although Zion is not mentioned, the description of repairing deserted cities undoubtedly refers to Isaiah's theme of Zion as the dwelling place of God with His people. The city was once Jerusalem, but Isaiah increasingly describes it as a spiritual reality rather than a physical one. Nevertheless, the work of the Redeemer, the Servant, has always been to restore. This is a message we often leave out of the Gospel, particularly today when there is a great rush to do things and leave the past behind. We will not be faithful to God's word unless we adhere to the scriptural truth that God's work is to restore what is good and right and true in the world; such things are not simply to be found 'anew' in what happens next, as those who wish to turn their backs on the past would like.

## Application

This whole text is brim full of implications about the practical work of the good news of God through the Redeemer. Jesus, of course, is our model and we can safely say that we fulfil God's Word if we base our ministry on Him, on what He said and did, and on what He commissioned His disciples to do. It would take many pages to outline some of the possibilities, from healing and deliverance ministry, to the practical work of alleviating the hunger of those who are starving through poverty, to releasing people from the prison of being prevented from hearing the Gospel, to basing the ministry of the church on helping people who have suffered ('those who mourn'). Our task, however, is to be guided by the Lord in how we put these simple but powerful words into action ourselves, knowing that this commission was given to Christ, and through Him is given directly to us all both as individuals and as the church.

However, this whole vision is in itself something people often forget. The glory of being a part of God's worldwide church is that we can rejoice to be associated with every conceivable expression of the good news of God and the work of redemption in the world! Sometimes, because of the troubles of our churches and the lack of regard (sometimes justified and sometimes not) we have for church denominations, people prefer to think of the church in only its local setting. How dangerous this is. The Redemption of the whole world is our Saviour's task, and how glorious it is to be a part of this! We each have our part to play, and the Lord God rejoices to use us to fulfil His commission according to His plan for the world.

In the light of this, we do well to look at this passage carefully, remembering that part of the work is that of rebuilding righteousness and rebuilding the dwelling places of God on earth (spiritually) that have been deserted or overtaken by the enemy. Rebuilding is not fashionable, and raising up ruins is not a picture Christians can easily use to enthuse people or make them part with money or resources for 'mission'. However, alongside everything else, it is essential, and before His death, Jesus did a great deal to rebuild Judaism and challenge the Pharisaic forces destroying the religion of His beloved people. He may not have been able to 'save' His own people who rejected Him, but He certainly ensured that their scriptures and their example of faithfulness has never been lost to the church. With the Lord, let us do all God's work.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Write down a list, in your own words, of what the Gospel work of redemption entails, and share this with your group.
2. How does God judge the world today? Where do we see His 'favour'? Share and discuss examples of these things.
3. What can people do to build up the work of God's church, and recover that which is good from the wreckage of the past?

### **Personal comments by author**

*From time to time, by the very nature of what I do, I have to write about a well known passage such as this. It is frankly difficult to summarise everything that can be said about such a passage, and I am aware that most people have strong views about what this passage means. Nevertheless, I have found it helpful to read what others say about it, and let myself be challenged. It is my hope that somewhere in this study, the Lord will use a phrase here or there to challenge you, and therefore help you find a deeper understanding of God's 'Gospel'. There is so much more for us to understand, and so much more for us to do.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to do:** Read Luke 4:16-20, and then read this passage again. What does this tell us about Jesus' ministry, and what does it tell you about His call upon your life, and about the call of God's people to the church?
- **Something to pray about and do:** Pray for all who are bound in sin and also those in any bondage which is not their fault. Ask the Lord to help you find ways to put this liberating message of Isaiah 61:1-4 into practice.

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## Final Prayer

Place Your Spirit in our hearts, Lord Jesus Christ.; for You alone can guide us to be fruitful in Your Kingdom. Make us joyful and glad to be your servants, and bless us as we put our every effort into doing what You would have us do. We ask this for the glory of Your name: AMEN

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