

The Gospel Before Christ Died

Isaiah 40, 52, 61; Luke 4

Turn to Isaiah 40. For us, the *gospel* is the story of Jesus dying for our sins and rising again. That event, the first Easter, is at the center of the *gospel* in the book of Acts, and also in the NT Letters. We would have trouble describing the *gospel*, the good news of our faith, without mentioning Christ's death for us, and his resurrection. That's fine, just as it should be.

But in Matthew 4:23, we read *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.*

It says almost exactly the same thing again in Mt 9:35 – *Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news, the gospel, of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness.*

Jesus was teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the *gospel* of the kingdom. He had not died for us, and had not risen, so what is the *gospel*? Matthew thinks Jesus is preaching the *gospel*. Jesus thinks he's preaching the *gospel*. What *gospel* is that, what good news is that?

We are talking about these things because of the Sermon on the Mount. Starting next week, we're going to go through the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7. And the Sermon on the Mount begins with *blessings* on people in trouble: *blessed* are the poor in spirit, *blessed* are those who mourn. If you're poor in spirit, and mourning, that's good news.

So, for just a few minutes, let's be curious about what "gospel" means, what "good news" means, when Jesus is just beginning his ministry. And to understand what he's talking about, we need to hear an OT story again, and read Isaiah.

The Jewish Exiles

Last winter we went through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Each of those prophets had lots to say about the exile. About 600 years before Christ, the Babylonians came to Judah and ransacked it and destroyed the temple, and took many Jews captive to Babylon.

This was God's punishment because Israel repeatedly ignored the two basic requirements of their covenant with God. They would not love God, and they would not love their Jewish neighbours. They kept worshipping other gods, and they continued to treat one another horribly.

150 years pass. The last half of Isaiah was written to comfort and encourage the exiled Jews in Babylon. God had not forgotten them or rejected them, he wanted to take care of them.

Our three Isaiah Scriptures were all prophecies to comfort captive Israelites. And these three texts all use the word “gospel,” that is, “good news.” That word comes from Isaiah, mostly from these three paragraphs in Isaiah. First, Isaiah 40.

Good news – God is coming! Isaiah 40:9-11

*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!”
See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him, and 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.*

So, what’s the good news? “Lift up your voice and shout: ‘Here is God! God is coming, the Sovereign Lord is coming.’”

He’s the sovereign Lord, he comes with power, he rules with a mighty arm. That’s why it’s called the “kingdom.” God himself is coming with power to rule. This is a kingdom where God is coming to be King.

And it will be a kind and tender kingdom: *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.* The good news is that God is coming to rule with power and his mighty arm, and he will tend his people like a gentle shepherd. That’s the good news. Isa 52 is our second paragraph.

Good news – God returns! Isaiah 52:7-10

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those
who bring good news, who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”
Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy.
When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.
Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.*

In slightly different words, this is the same. The good news, the good tidings, are that your God reigns, and is returning to his people.

He will reign, he will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, so again it sounds like a kingdom. This is the good news of the kingdom.

And again it is a kind and wonderful return of God. He brings peace, and salvation. People shout for joy, they burst into songs of joy, because the Lord comforts his people, and the whole earth will see what he is doing.

These two paragraphs are the foundation of what Isaiah understood the gospel to be. So when Luke 3 says that “with many other words, John proclaimed the good news to them, this is what John had in mind, and this is what his audience understood him to be saying. And Jesus picked up with this right after John. Isaiah 61 takes this farther.

God’s Servant Proclaims the Gospel - Isa 61:1-3

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—*

*to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.

Isaiah predicts a special Servant of God whom God will anoint with the Holy Spirit, and who will bring God’s ways to his people. It is pretty clear from the comfort and good news here that this is talking about the same good news of the kingdom of God that we read about in Isaiah 40 and 52.

What Isaiah 61 adds is that the first preacher of this good news will be God’s special anointed Servant, who is Jesus Christ of course. *He* will proclaim this, and *he* will bind up the broken hearted, and *he* will release the prisoners.

In the first two paragraphs, we read that God himself would show up and do these things, but now we learn that God is going to anoint his special Servant, and the Servant will preach this good news. But not only will he proclaim it, God sends him heal God’s people, and comfort and rescue them. Now turn to Luke 4.

Today this Scripture is Fulfilled in your Hearing - Luke 4:16-22

[After Jesus was tempted for forty days, he returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.] *He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the*

synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written [in Isa 61]:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

This is a remarkable moment, a stunning moment. Isaiah 40 and 52 told us good news, that God was going to come to his people and do a great and wonderful work, he was going to rule powerfully and kindly, he would comfort his people and rescue them and give them reasons to sing for joy.

Isaiah 61 told us that the spearhead of this great work of God, this gospel of God, was God’s special Servant who was chosen by God and anointed with the Spirit to bring this kingdom.

And in Luke 4, Jesus reads those very words to them, looks up Isaiah 61 and reads it in the synagogue, and sits down and says, “Today is that day, and I am that Servant, and you are watching and hearing the fulfillment of Isaiah 61 in this synagogue right now.”

It did not end well in Nazareth, but that’s not our point today. The gospel *we* hear is that Christ died for our sins, and rose the third day. And we respond by trusting him and following him, putting our lives in his hands. And that, my brothers and sisters, takes us right into the good news that Isaiah wrote about. It is the same message, just more focused. Same only clearer.

The gospel that’s preached to us, and that we follow, Christ is Lord and Savior, is still Isaiah’s gospel, it is the rule of God and the tenderness of the gentle shepherd and comfort for those who mourn, and all of that. The gospel became much more focused, as to how exactly God was going to restore his people and bless the Gentiles. The Servant became the center of the same gospel.

So, where are we going here? Three things.

1, The Beatitudes are the Gospel Matthew 5:3-10.

In Matthew 4, we read that Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, that is, the Sovereign Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the *poor*, to comfort all who *mourn*. The beatitudes begin, “blessed are the *poor in spirit*, blessed are those who *mourn*.” That is the good news, God’s blessing on the poor in spirit, his blessing on those who mourn.

Jesus could not be clearer that he is bringing what Isaiah talked about. He might as well have read Isa 61, and said, “Today this is fulfilled in your hearing.” He is simply obeying the Scripture, saying what the Scripture and the Spirit tell him to say. The sermon on the mount begins as a clear fulfillment of Isaiah’s good news.

2, Blessed is the one who does not fall away because of me - Matt 11:16; Luke 7:23

Jesus knew his good news would also disappoint people. Jesus actually said this line to John the Baptist’s followers, to take back and repeat to John. John told Herod that Herod’s life was immoral, and since he was king of the Jews, he needed to clean up. John did to Herod what Nathan a thousand years earlier did to king David about his immorality with Bathsheba.

But Herod was not David. Herod put John in prison. John himself had preached the gospel of Isaiah. In Isaiah’s first servant song, it says freedom for captives, and release from prison. The fifth song repeats both of those, freedom for captives, release from prison. John was in prison, had been for a while now, and Jesus was not helping. Where’s the good news?

John doubted, sent messengers to Jesus: “Jesus, are you the one?” Jesus told the messengers to tell John about the good things that were happening, and then he said, “blessed is the one who does not fall away because of me.” Disappointment. Jesus disappointed John, big time.

And Jesus knew it. He understood, and he was not going to fix this. And he knew John was not alone. People listening to me right now have disappointment like that. Jesus is talking to you about your disappointments. He says to you: “blessed is the one who does not fall away because of me.” Jesus did what he was called to do, and he could feel how disappointing this was.

Jesus knew we would have reason to expect more, as John expected more, but Jesus had other plans. Matthew 5 has nine beatitudes, and for me this in Matthew 11 is the tenth beatitude: “blessed is the one who does not fall away because of me [for theirs is the kingdom of heaven].”

You see, Jesus brings the kingdom in two installments. His first coming brought forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit, and the oneness of the body of Christ, and a guaranteed inheritance. The second installment is at his second coming. That’s when the good news of the kingdom takes over completely. No disappointment then. It’ll be like we are dreaming.

3, Nevertheless, the Gospel is the Best News Ever!

Brothers and sisters, OT and NT agree on this: those who trust God and follow the Christ he gave, are the most fortunate people on the planet. This good news overwhelms everything else.

We read Ps 1 at zoom midweek. Blessed are those who pursue God’s ways. They are not like chaff, blown away by the wind, they are like trees, planted by water, trees that always bear fruit when they are supposed to. Always. Why?

Because we are blessed, because the Sovereign Lord watches over us. He's our shepherd, he carries us when they need it, his goodness and mercy always follow us.

At elders meeting this week, we read Col 1:11-12. "I pray that you will be strengthened with power, according to the might of God's glory, to show all endurance and patience." How does God's great and glorious power show itself in our lives, if he answers this prayer? We have all endurance and patience.

That means our faith will not fail in our disappointments, we will not fall away, we will continue to trust the Lord and live in his ways.

And the very next line, continuing the prayer for us, is that we "would joyfully thank the Father who qualified us to share in the inheritance of his holy people. He rescued us from the authority of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son his loves."

Look in the mirror, and say this about yourself: "God qualified me to share in the inheritance of his holy people. God rescued me from the authority of darkness. God transferred me to the kingdom of the Son he loves." That's the good news. And though we have troubles, these make a huge difference now.

Folks, we have heard the good news, and God helped us grasp it, we could see the light in this and we wanted it, God stood in our path so we would find him, and we are now the followers of his Son. The best thing that could happen to any human has happened to us. The good news that Isaiah promised, and John and Jesus preached, has reached to us right here, 2021.

So let's be thankful. That's the only way to respond to Scriptures about the good news, to the gospel. Giving thanks is how we walk through that door into enjoying what we have in God. When we say these things to each other, the door gets opened. But to walk through, we thank God. That's why God says to give thanks, that's why Paul prays that his people would give thanks, so we can walk through and begin to taste what God has done for us. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, the good news has come to us. Your great work on earth has come to us. You tend your flock like a shepherd; now that's us: You gather the lambs in your arms, and carry us close to your heart; you gently lead those that have young. We are in that. You stood in our path, God, you were found by those not seeking you, and so this has come to us. You have rescued us from the authority of darkness, and moved us into the kingdom of the Son you love. You have sealed us for yourself, and promised an inheritance. We are so glad. Thank you. Amen.

DOXOLOGY: To him who is able to keep us from stumbling, and to present us before his glorious presence, without fault, and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.