

Isaiah 61:1-3

12/14/14

Christmas music, Christmas parties, Christmas sales, family gatherings – the Christmas season is in full swing. But so also is Christmas depression. Why is that? Some people attribute it to the lack of sunlight and the cold, but I think there is a far more pertinent reason.

Our culture and society places so much emphasis on the **feelings** of Christmas. Many people think the joy of Christmas is found in family. Other people build their Christmas joy on the sights, sounds and smells of Christmas. Yet others claim that the meaning and joy of Christmas can be found in the human spirit, in giving rather than receiving.

But the truth is that family ties are temporary - people move, people die. The human spirit is selfish - giving to others in order to **feel good** or **superior** to those who do not. The trees lose their needles, Christmas lights burn out. There is no substance to any of it. We know this, and still year after year people fool ourselves into thinking there is.

And yet, I would say that there is true and lasting joy in Christmas - wonderful joy that fills the heart. It is not found in the gifts that are given. It is not found gathering of families. It is not found in the music of the holidays. It is found only in one place - the Word of God. It is only found in Jesus. Let's learn that **JESUS IS THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS.**

Jesus, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, tells us about himself some 700 years before he was born. He says: **The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach 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.**

The act of anointing was the Hebrew way of installing someone into the office of prophet, priest or king. A special oil was poured on a person, symbolizing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that man to give him the gifts necessary to carry out his duties. Every anointing in the Old Testament reminded the Israelites that God was going to send the Messiah or Christ (both terms mean **the anointed one**) who would be our perfect prophet, priest and king.

Jesus, the Son of God, is this Messiah. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon him to anoint him as our perfect prophet who would reveal our God's heart to us, as our perfect priest who would offer the only sacrifice that would atone for our sins, and as our perfect King who would save us from our enemies and deliver us home to heaven.

And Jesus, our Messiah, was sent to **preach this good news to the poor.** Oh, how wonderful these words are to my ears, for I am nothing but a beggar before God. Who are **the poor**? The Messiah is not talking about the physically poor here, but the spiritually poor. They are those who realize that they do not have a single ounce of righteousness or goodness to offer God. They are those who, after looking at themselves in the mirror of God's law, realize that they have sinned against God and deserve nothing but his eternal wrath in hell.

And that realization of their sins breaks their hearts. With a contrite heart and a repentant spirit they confess to God all their sins and iniquities. They are saddened that their sins have separated them from their Creator. They see that they are captive to sin, that the good they want to do they cannot do, and the evil they do not want to do, this

they keep on doing. They cry out with the apostle Paul: **who will save from this body of death?** because they realize they cannot save themselves. They are in a spiritual prison. They cannot see any hope because, outside of the grace and mercy of God, there is no hope. So they cry out to him for help. They cry to the Lord for salvation, trusting in his promise to deliver them according to his grace.

My friends, I hope and pray that you yourself are one of these people who realize this about yourself. If not, then you have lost your need for **Christ** in Christmas. God's law is crystal clear. Your sins have separated you from God. If this fact does not terrify you, then you will not understand the true meaning of Christmas – you will never find true joy in Jesus, for it is only when we realize that we are all beggars before God, blind, weak, pitiful, rotten, evil, condemned sinners who deserve not a single ounce of grace and hope, that the true joy in who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish takes root.

For us who know and confess our unrighteousness, who confess our spiritual poverty before God, Christ assures us: **The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.** What is the good news? That he himself is our righteousness. He came into this world, to be born under the law in order to keep the law perfectly for us. He was tempted in every way as we are but was without sin. Jesus is righteous and he offer this righteousness to all as a free gift. We, who receive this gift through faith, are no longer beggars, because Jesus has paid the debt of our sins and has given us his rich righteousness as our own.

This news gives us great joy. It **binds our broken heart.** Why? Because we are at peace with God. He loves us. He heard our cry. He saved us. And he promises to wipe every tear from our eye.

Through the Gospel, the Lord has freed us from our captivity to sin and fear of death. The devil no longer holds any power over us. We are free - free to love and serve God in all righteousness and holiness. We are free to love and serve our fellowman. We are free from our selfishness. The prison doors have been opened and we are free - free to know God!

Christ has come to **proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God** - Christ's birth ushered in a new era. The angels sang about it after they announced the birth of the Savior to the shepherds: **Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.** The era of God's favor has come with Christ. It offers peace and the forgiveness to all people and it rests on those who receive this offer in faith. This faith, too, is only a work of God's grace. Yes, with Christ, the Lord ushered in a new era of favor and forgiveness, but also vengeance against the enemies of his precious elect.

Christ came to crush the head of Satan. He came to destroy the power of sin. He came to defeat death. And he accomplished this in full. On the last day, he will fully exact his vengeance on all enemies of Gospel - rescuing his people safely to his side.

This truth, this wonderful truth of God's grace and favor, of his forgiveness and love to all who look to him in faith, gives consolation to all those who mourn over their sins and the consequences of sin in their lives. As our text says, it bestows on them **a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.**

In the ancient world, sitting in ashes was a sign of the deepest sorrow and despair. We think of Job, who sat in ashes, when he lost everything - his riches, his

family and even his health. But he had Jesus in spite of all he suffered. With confidence he cried out: **I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!**

Even though there is much to cause us pain, sorrow and depression in this life, we nevertheless have Jesus, and having him, we have everything. In the end, when our life is over, he will usher us to his side and wipe every tear from our eye. He will take away all that hurts, all that causes sorrow, and give us joy beyond all gladness. At the resurrection on the last day, he will raise our bodies to life to live with him in the perfect paradise he is even now preparing for us. And how this truth cheers us in even the worst of losses! This truth is the joy of our hearts. It lifts our souls to heaven and sustains us throughout our earthly lives.

Those who hold on to Jesus in faith will be called **oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.**

Yes, our faith is a work of the Lord. He planted the Gospel in our hearts and it took root. We have become like mighty oaks that drink in the water of life, that meditate on the Word of God day and night. And as we meditate on the Word, looking for and finding Christ on every page of Scripture, our faith and joy in him increases. And, as we are nourished through the Gospel, we produce fruits. We do good works, acts of service and love towards God and our neighbor - all to the glory of his name.

The trees and lights, candles and cookies, family and gifts - all this is nice, but it is nothing compared to the true joy we have in Jesus. This is what Christmas all about. May this joy be your focus this Christmas and always as you remember what the Lord has accomplished for you and what he continues to accomplish in you through Christ Jesus. Amen.

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