

“Setting the Captives Free”

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Opening Prayer

Good Morning, hopefully you folks are doing well wherever you may be. God is in control, and praise Him we can still look up and know that He watches over us. We are not promised a perfect and easy life, as most of you likely know, but He has promised to walk with us through what life throws our way. In everything He is still in charge, and in everything He is at work in ways we cannot even understand. I was reminded while listening to a sermon online from Pastor John McArthur the other day that when life hurts us, the question we should be asking is not “Why would God allow this to happen to us?” but rather “Why does a good God not allow more to happen to us?” Ultimately, by Jesus’s sacrifice and resurrection, no matter what we face here we know that eternity waits for us who place our lives in His hands. In that same vein, for the remainder of the quarantine (however long that may be), we are going to focus on the hope that Jesus gives us. We are going to be looking at parts of scripture that fill us with joy and hope. Last week with Easter we remembered where our salvation comes from, and we celebrated it. This week we start looking at our hope and joy by talking about how He has set the captives free... you and me.

Our first reading this morning came from Isaiah 61:1-11. To give you some background, the book of Isaiah is split up into two (or depending on who you ask, three) distinct parts. You have the first portion from chapters 1-39 that proclaim Israel’s coming downfall if they continue to go against the Lord, then from 40-66 he talks about the return from exile that will come, along with prophecies of redemption of God’s people. Historically, from chapter 40-66 Isaiah is writing to a nation that is in captivity and is being persecuted by the Babylonians. It is not a pretty captivity, and the Hebrews are horrifically persecuted. During this period of exile you see books like Lamentations getting written to show grief. Many of the Psalms that we read that are heartbreaking prayers are attributed to the time of exile. The Israelites, they are waiting for the Lord to bring them home and to set things right. It is here that Isaiah writes in 61:1 “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.” In the later part of the book of Isaiah, the way that things are often given is through poems. Isaiah 61:1-11 is itself a prophetic poem, which held meaning for the Israelites then and it does for us now. For the Israelites hearing this in their day, these words were very important. These eleven verses (and most all of that third section of Isaiah) was proclaiming the truth that the Lord was going to bring them home. They were prisoners in Babylon, but here God Himself (speaking through Isaiah) is telling the Israelites what He is going to allow them to do. The Hebrews will “rebuild the ancient ruins” (Jerusalem, vs. 4), they will “be called priests of the Lord” (vs. 6), they will have joy instead of humiliation (vs. 7), etc.

Basically, in this chapter of Isaiah, the Lord is telling them that He still cares and that He will bring them home, that He will release them from their captivity. If you know your history, or if you have read the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, then you know God's promise here comes true. The Israelites do return home under Cyrus king of Persia, and they do rebuild their cities and temple etc. All that is fantastic history for us now and it shows that God honors His promises, but there is more to it Beloved. That promise to set the captives free, that the "Anointed One" would comfort those who mourn, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives... that promise is for us too. For without Christ we are bound to our sin, and the penalty of it which is death.

Luke 4:18 reads "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed." Sound familiar? That is a direct quote of Isaiah 61:1 by Jesus. By Christ's blood we are declared free Beloved Congregation. As Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." I don't know if any of you have ever been in captivity, the closest I have ever felt was being in detention in 9th grade, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand that being released from captivity is a glorious thing. To not be in bondage, to be free and clear, to have no condemnation, how wonderful! All of us, by our own doings, by our own sins, were once in bondage to them, but no longer by the glory of Christ. As Ephesians 5:8 says "For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light." This is the joy that Paul is writing in Romans 8, that we are set free from what previously held us captive. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death." This is the good news, and it isn't only good news in the sense that one day we will go to heaven and things will be wonderful there. (Which is of course true.) There is good news for us here and now in this truth, in the midst of Covid-19, in the midst of a horrible start to our decade, in the midst of isolation, frustration, despair... For those of us who are set upon Christ and put Him at our center, the truth is "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace." We have life and peace Beloved if we but recognize it.

You may be wondering how someone can have peace in this life at all, let alone in dealing with the garbage that we all have been going through. "How can I have peace when my life is terrible?" "How can I have peace when I am terrified to even go outside?" "How can I have peace when it seems like the whole world is crumbling?" In simple words, it is because the Lord loves us and cares for us. The whole of Romans chapter eight is fantastic, and every single one of us should read it (seriously, go do it), but the second portion that we read this morning points us in the right direction on how we can have peace. Verses 14-15 read "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out 'Abba! Father!'" Beloved, if you call upon Christ as Savior, then you are one of God's children, and He watches over you, and He gives us a new Spirit. This new Spirit, Paul assures

us, is not one of slavery. How many people do you know who look at the Lord as some kind of whip-slinging master up in heaven who cares little for us? That is simply not who He is, although He does call for obedience. No, Paul instead compares God's love and watching over us to that of a good father.

Many of you who are watching this are parents, so Paul's simile here likely strikes a chord. Currently Rhianna, my wife, is working on our first. At the time we are recording this I haven't even seen the ultrasound yet, but I can assure you that I love that child. For those of you with children, or those of you who had a wonderful parent, or even for those of you who had an amazing guardian, you know what this looks like. A good father is going to lay down some rules, not for anger's sake but for love's sake, to protect the child. Furthermore, a good father is going to do everything they can to comfort their child in distress. (No matter their age right?) Our heavenly Father, who loves us enough to die for us, has promised us that He walks with us. He has promised us that we can have peace and joy and hope... because He is in control. No matter how bad this life gets, we still have eternity. No matter how lonely we get, He is there with us. No matter what you are going through, He loves you. We can have peace in knowing that He has set us free. Many Christians live their lives as though they are still slaves to this world and its sin and its death its fear. Beloved, we are no longer under condemnation. Beloved, we (by being given His Spirit) no longer go this alone. Because we know where we go, because we know who leads us, because He lives and is not in that grave, we can have peace and joy. We can be set free.

Folks, it has been a hard year in many ways. I know many of you have been through much. But we do not go this alone. We are not in bondage to our sin and to death, you are enslaved to nothing except the Good Father, and He loves you enough to die for you. To speak plainly, many of us have been living in enslavement to fear during this time period. We worry about our kids, we worry about our parents, we worry about the economy, we worry about our individual hurts that are exacerbated in this time. I get it, again we have our first child on the way, we all struggle with that worry. But we shouldn't forget that we do not need to live our lives in fear. We have been set free by Christ's blood, and by His resurrection we are promised that eternal joy. Practically speaking, you may be asking "How, Pastor Jake, do I get that peace today? I want it, I recognize that the Lord has given it, but how do I actually go about obtaining it?" Simple friends, we have to turn it over to Him. We turn over our fears and our hurts and our anxieties... our chains... to Him through prayer and understanding. If you do know the promises that the Lord has given to you in scripture, start reading your Bible in Romans eight today and know how much He loves you. Sit in prayer, daily, and give over to Him those things that try to put you back into bondage. Give your hurts, fears, anxieties, struggles, sins, doubts, whatever, give them over to Him in prayer. He understands, He loves you, He desires you to live a life free of the bonds that are placed upon us. It doesn't mean life is easy of course, and there is time for mourning, but at the core of who you are is that calm assurance that Christ

lives and reigns, that He loves us, and that we have eternity to look forward to with Him. We have been set free. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer