

A Call for Proclamation

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Watermark. If you do not know me, my name is Alfie, and I'm one of the guys here on staff. I help out with the university ministry. And it was really great. Thank you, Jordan and Iris, for sharing about our trip.

And in a way, they've done, you know, I don't know, 40% of what I'm going to try to do today. Talk about how the gospel transforms us, how the gospel fills us with praise and worship, that we would go out and we would be about God's mission in the world today.

We need to be about God's mission because this is a world that isn't very hopeless, isn't very hopeful. It is hopeless. There's a lot of hopelessness around.

You don't have to look far. You open a newspaper, you look on Facebook, you look at a magazine, there is sadness around. There is a longing for freedom from suffering.

There is a longing for a hope that is permanent, that is tangible, that is eternal. You know, this past week, there was a shooting in Orlando, and that brought up many questions and many strong feelings.

[1 : 18] There is anger, confusion, hurt, sadness. I don't know how you felt. How did you respond?

But it's not just far away in the U.S., it's here as well, because Hong Kong is meant to be this land of freedom and opportunity where if you come here and you can work hard enough, you'll have a great life, you'll have a great family, and everything will be perfect.

But it seems that the stuff of life here in Hong Kong drains our hope. Whether it's people coming and taking our jobs because they're trying to escape their hopeless situation overseas, where they can't get jobs there, they're coming to Hong Kong, and now there's this huge competition for jobs.

Or maybe you're trying to find a home for your family, but it seems like this unlimited amount of money is coming out of China, driving home house prices up, and you feel hopeless or trapped.

You know, it could be that you're looking for a husband, but there aren't any quality guys around. Or maybe you're a guy, and you're just complaining that the girls are just far too picky.

[2 : 31] All of this brings up feelings of hopelessness. We feel trapped. We feel stuck.

Like God has abandoned us. Like he doesn't care about where we are. He doesn't care about what we're going through. We're alone, and even when we look up to him, we can't seem to reach or call out.

God seems far away. Sometimes he feels, it feels like he's abandoned us. This isn't a foreign feeling, I don't think, to many of us.

I think we've all been through times where we feel hopeless about one thing or another. Yet, with all of this, we look at our key words at Watermark, and we think we feel hopeless, but we're supposed to be on mission.

How do we do that? When I can't deal with the struggles of my life, how am I supposed to go and spread this message of joy? Anyway, what I want to show you guys today is that if we haven't received this message of freedom and of hope in the gospel, that we can't be people on mission, for us to be a church that is reaching out and loving and sharing the gospel and doing justice in our community, that we need to be people who are captured, who are amazed, who are freed by the gospel.

[4 : 15] So we've been in this series in Isaiah. We've spent about five weeks on it, and we've been going through this passage at the end, the series of passages at the end of Isaiah, which talk about this great news, this hope for God's people.

But Isaiah starts early on in the beginning, and it starts with Isaiah preaching to the people of Israel. The people of Israel have turned to follow idols.

They've turned, and they've put their hope and security in the horses of Egypt. And Isaiah tells them in chapter one that you are my children that I've brought up, but you have rebelled against me. He calls them to repent, to turn back to God, but they don't. Isaiah calls to them again, but they continue in their ways.

Eventually, these people are conquered by the nation of Babylon, and they're taken away in exile. And while they're in exile, they feel abandoned.

[5 : 21] They feel stuck and hopeless. And Isaiah calls these people, and he says, God has not left you alone. He's not done with you. Isaiah says that God is saying, I am with you.

Fear not. He says in chapter 41, he says that your idols haven't saved you, but I am going to be your salvation.

He says these things that you turn to to look for hope and satisfaction and security, they have failed you, but I am your God. I am the one that calls to you, and I am the one that is going to bring you out of Babylon.

After a number of years, the Persian Empire comes in and destroys Babylon, and they begin sending back the exiles to Israel. And this is a passage that we're going to be reading today, the passage that these exiles returning to Jerusalem would have opened up and read what Isaiah had written many years ago.

We talked about how Isaiah called the people of Israel to be satisfied in God. That was in Isaiah chapter 55, that the things that they were looking for would not satisfy.

[6 : 44] We looked in chapter 56 about how God had a big picture for Israel's new hope, that he was going to bring in the outsiders, the people who would normally have been kept out of Israel's society.

We saw how God was calling them not just to be righteous in their religious actions, but to be doing justice and calling people who have been treated unjustly to see a God who loves them and cares for them.

And last week, we saw a vision that God gave for God's people not just being defined by their culture or ethnicity, but how God's glory is made amazing and great because he's bringing all people from all nations to himself.

And now we find ourselves in Isaiah chapter 61, where God says he is bringing good news to the poor and he is opening the prison for the captives.

He's telling these people, these exiles, that they are a part of people who are going to be enjoying God's freedom and his blessing over them.

[8 : 00] So today, we're going to have three parts. Hopefully, you'll follow along. We're going to talk about what God's hope looked like for the exiles reading this for the first time.

Then we're going to fast forward a little bit and hear about what this passage meant for the Israelites reading it again when they're oppressed by Romans.

And we'll finish up looking at what this passage has to say for us, what it's calling us to. Before we start, I want to talk a little bit about a Japanese soldier in World War II.

His name was Hiro Onoda. And he was an intelligence officer and he was sent to an island in the Philippines called Lubang. And he was told that he had a very important mission to go and sabotage U.S. military installations on the island.

And he went and he was attached to a group of soldiers but in a couple of months, all but a few of his soldiers had died.

[9 : 04] The U.S. had come in, they'd taken control of the island and he told his soldiers to go and hide in the jungles and in the hills. A couple of months later, the war ended and leaflets were dropped all over these islands, all these places where Japanese soldiers were hiding, telling them the war was over, that they could come out, that they didn't have to fight anymore.

Onoda and his men, there were three of them left, they found these leaflets and they looked at them and they were convinced that it was a trick, that the war wasn't really over, that it was a way to get them out of hiding so that they could be killed.

And so for many years, despite the war having ended, they continued their little battle in the hills. They would occasionally clash with Philippine and American forces, but they lived their lives in constant fear.

They lived their lives afraid of what would happen, afraid of an enemy that would kill them. This is how Israel lived when they came back from exile.

They lived in fear of an enemy. They lived in fear of Babylon. They lived in fear of slavery. You can read about it in books like Ezra and Nehemiah, where the people, instead of going and rebuilding Jerusalem, instead of rebuilding the rubble and the ashes of their temple, of their walls, they paneled up their houses and made little forts where they would be safe, where they would be hidden.

[10:45] They were worried. They were in fear. They felt abandoned. And God calls out to them. God calls out to them and says, I have come to bring good news.

And Isaiah 61, he says, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to these slaves, to open up the prison for those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, to comfort those who are mourning.

This message of hope from God says that after all their struggle, that they could live in hope, they could live in freedom. It's good news. It's healing.

It's comfort for these people who have been liberated from years of Babylonian slavery, people who felt abandoned and hopeless.

But he doesn't just give them this message of hope. He shows them what this hope is supposed to do. In verse 4, he says that these people are going to build up ancient ruins, the things that the Babylonians had destroyed, the things that the surrounding nations had picked away from the ruins, that they were going to be people that would build up former devastations.

[12:08] They would repair ruined cities. And it's not just an instruction that Isaiah is giving them, that God is giving them. Other prophets and leaders would call these people to say, hey, look, God has set you free.

He used the Persians to free you from the Babylonians. You don't have to hide in your holes anymore. You can live like free people. Build up the walls.

Build up the temple. Worship God. Find your security. And your identity in Him. But Israel was afraid. They felt abandoned.

They felt alone. They were living in fear. They had called, they had been called to live as free people. But they continued to live as if they were slaves.

You know, back on Lubang Island, Hiro Noda and his three remaining soldiers, they spent many years, almost 28 years, fighting against an enemy that wasn't there.

[13:19] They spent their years in fear of nothing, fighting against nothing, hiding from nothing. Again, leaflets were dropped and this time and this time it had pictures and letters from their family members saying, the war is over.

Please come home. They looked at these letters and they said, no, this is another trick. This is another trick to get us out of hiding. The war is still going on.

In a couple of years, the remaining soldiers that were with Hiro Noda died and he was left alone. So he hid, he fortified his defenses and he continued to live in fear.

Hiro's story is an interesting one because if he's right, if the war is still going on, then what he was doing makes perfect sense. What he was doing, hiding and trying to keep safe is the right thing to do in a war when an enemy is looking for you, hunting you and trying to kill you.

But if the war is over, if what these leaflets said was true, then to continue to live in fear is the wrong thing.

[14:43] That he is free. He is free from his orders. He is free from fear of the enemy around him. But Israel acted in the same way.

They acted in fear when they were free. They acted like slaves when God had brought them good news. Many of us Christians, we act like these Israelites.

We feel like we are not free from the burdens of our past, that we are not free from the struggles that we face today.

But the gospel says that if your hope is in Christ, then you're free from guilt, from shame, that you're free from the expectation to be perfect because God has given us righteousness.

God says that you are loved so you don't need to look for it in other places. He says that you're forgiven so you have no need to prove yourself.

[15:56] But as Christians, so many times we live that way. We live, we do things, we act and we believe in a way that we still need to earn our salvation. We live as if we are still slaves to sin.

We live as if we're still slaves to our guilt. We live as if God doesn't care about us, that he's abandoned us, that he isn't going to call us to him.

The gospel says, Isaiah 61 says that there is liberty for the captives. Christians, if you are in Christ, then you need no fear of sin.

You need no fear of the enemy because God has defeated him. He says it's over. Just like he told Israelites, just like the leaflets told the Japanese soldiers, it's over.

You are free. The Jews living in exile here, continue to live as slaves under Babylonian masters.

[17:16] But if they were free, then they could enjoy their freedom. They could enjoy what that meant, being able to worship God, being identified with him, finding their security in him.

The Babylonians who had enslaved them were gone. They did not need to fear them anymore.

Christians, if you are in Christ, the sin that enslaved you has no power over you anymore.

Don't give an opportunity for your dead former master to have power over you because Jesus has come and he has said that you are free.

Now, we go 500 years forward and now these Israelites, they've tried to rebuild their city, they've rebuilt the temple, people, but they find themselves oppressed by a different kind of master.

They find themselves under the Roman Empire and these Romans are exporting Greek culture and trying to destroy what is left of the identity of God's people, their Jewish identity, their identity as God's chosen people.

[18:39] And in the midst of that, the people themselves became divided. You have on one side these religious Pharisees and they're the people that they found their freedom in ethnic and religious purity.

They increased the laws to this almost unattainable standard. They're the kind of people that would whisper under their breath when they saw something going wrong.

They're the kind of people that would post on Facebook about all the wrong things going on in the church today. On the other side was another group of people. These were the cultural, the social elites, these sinners.

They made the best of a tricky situation. They would join up and cozy up with the Romans. And their morality was defined by whatever got them ahead.

These are the kinds of people who would lie to get a promotion. Those who wouldn't worry about others suffering around them as long as they looked good, as long as they were comfortable.

[19:41] And between these two groups, those who couldn't be a religious elite or an elite in society, were the poor and the sick and the hungry, who fell between the cracks and suffered the worst of Roman oppression.

And into this backdrop, Jesus walks in. And it says that one day while he's in the synagogue in Nazareth, he opens up the scroll. You can read about it in Luke 4. and he finds this passage, Isaiah 61, and he reads it to the people.

It says, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, liberty to those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

God's favor. He rolled up the scroll, and he looked at the people, and he said, today, this scripture has been fulfilled before you. People looked at him, and they're a bit confused.

And they said, isn't this Joseph's son? Jesus comes, and he quotes this passage, and he says, what Isaiah left for those exiles so many years ago is about me.

[21:04] It's about what I am going to do. It's my manifesto. It's the things that I am going to spend my time doing. I'm going to spend my time preaching about. And we see this throughout the gospels.

We see how God healed people. He brought sight to blind people. He forgives the sins of the paralytic and tells them to stand up and walk. One moment, he tenderly calls to a Samaritan woman and shows her where she can find living water.

And another moment, he calls to the Pharisees to turn away from their hypocrisy. Jesus spent his time preaching this gospel, addressing all the wickedness that sin had brought into the world.

And he said, this is about me. I am your freedom. I am where your hope is. Your hope isn't in being able to follow these laws perfectly.

Your hope isn't in escaping the laws and living your life your own way. He looks to them both and he says, I am your freedom. I am the place where you can find hope.

[22:13] The people heard this and they were divided. Throughout his ministry, you saw people coming to Jesus because they knew that he was the hope for their sick. He was the hope for their

poverty.

They knew that he could feed them. Again, other people came to see what they could get from him. And when they didn't like what he had to say, they walked away. Other people, as we see in this passage, tried to kill him.

After Jesus read this passage in the synagogue, the people were enraged. A riot started. They dragged Jesus and they tried to take him over to this cliff and throw him off. But it says that Jesus passed through the crowds and he went on his way.

He went to do what he had said, to bring good news to the people, to bring liberty and freedom to those who are lost. The religious people, they didn't like Jesus because he didn't stand for what they did.

He didn't hate the Romans like they wanted him to. In fact, his agenda was completely different. But they couldn't see the rescue that they needed, that it would come from Jesus.

[23 : 29] They didn't see that he would bring the freedom that they wanted, that their laws would only tie them and keep them as slaves. The sinners and the social elites, they didn't like Jesus either because he didn't seem concerned about the here and now, about their comfort and their satisfaction because he looked forward.

He was looking to an eternal kingdom and that wasn't the kind of freedom that they wanted. Jesus brings a message of freedom to all people, but many of us, we don't like it.

we don't like it because Jesus says uncomfortable things about who we are, about our sinful nature, about the state of our hearts and our souls before him. After three years of his ministry, after three years of good news, of hope and freedom, eventually the people would take him to another hill where they would kill him.

Where Jesus had been spending his life correcting the wrongs that sin had caused, in his death, he would get to the root of the problem.

On the cross, where these people thought they were killing God's messenger, instead God was killing sin.

[25 : 08] We see in the Bible that three days later he rose again and showed the people who trusted in him, the people who had hope and the freedom that he would bring, that their freedom wasn't just from the Roman oppressors, the freedom wasn't just from the Pharisees' oppression, the freedom wasn't from the sinners who took advantage from them, their freedom was even over death, that those who had hope in Christ had a freedom that goes beyond the life we live, to an eternity where God is restoring, where we get to see what Isaiah talks about, we get to see in its fullness, in its beauty, perfect good news, perfect hope, perfect freedom for those who are bound.

the Bible says that we are in a state of spiritual poverty, we need God's good news, that we are blind to our sin, we need God to open our eyes, the Bible says that the rules we follow cannot save us, and neither can our freedom outside them.

And if you are not a Christian here today, then Jesus calls you and he says, I have good news for you, because where your imperfection haunts you, God says that in me you are perfect.

Where you struggle for approval from other people, God says, you don't need that because I love you. Where we fail at work and at home, Jesus says that my strength, my grace is enough for you. On the cross, God fulfills what he says in Isaiah 61. He says, trust in me because while everything else is going to let you down, while your work and your family and your nice two bedroom flat are eventually going to fail you and let you down, I will not.

[27 : 36] I will give you freedom and hope beyond this life. I will give you unimaginable love. I will bring you into a family that lasts forever.

forever and I will give you forgiveness for every wrong, for every sin. This is a hope not just for the exiles who are hearing this in Isaiah 61.

It's not just for the people in that synagogue at Sabbath hearing Jesus in Luke 4. It's a hope for us. It's a hope that we have heard from the mouth of God himself.

In 1974, a young Japanese guy, his name was Nariyo Suzuki, decided that he would travel to Lubang Island to go and find Onoda.

He searched and after a couple of days he found him hiding in the jungle. And this is the first person that Hiro Onoda had spoken to in over two years. And Suzuki shared with him the good news.

[28 : 44] The war is over. You don't have to hide. But Onoda wasn't convinced. And so Suzuki went back to Japan, found Onoda's commanding officer, the guy that had sent him out on this

mission and brought him back to Lubang and said, the war is over.

You don't have to follow these orders anymore. You're free. You can come out of hiding. He turned over his weapons. He came out of the jungle.

And he returned to Japan, where he lived not in fear of Americans who were going to kill him, not in fear of being found out, not struggling in the jungle, but living a free and full life.

Jesus' message hasn't changed. What he said to the people in the synagogue that day is the same message that he has for us today. real freedom, real good news.

And he came so we could hear it, not just from a second-hand messenger, but he came that we would hear it firsthand, that we would hear it from him, that we would see in him our hope.

[30 : 08] as Christians, are our lives showing that hope?

Do our lives show that we are really saved? Do our lives show that we have confidence in God? do we walk around in fear or in trust? Do we live our lives in guilt or in confidence?

I love what Isaiah talks about in verses 10 and 11. He says, the people who have experienced God's freedom, they rejoice in God.

They say, my soul will exalt in my God because he has given me clothes of righteousness. He has given me robes of salvation. He says that God's people who have experienced his love, God's people who have experienced his salvation are like a plant that sprouts forward with righteousness and praise, that their lives are a fountain of God's love, of God's grace.

[31 : 28] Do we? Do we look like that? Do we? Sound like these people who are rejoicing? Do we wear these robes?

Are we trees in a garden? Often in the church, and if I want us, I'm talking about myself, we look for other things other than Jesus, other than his righteousness and his salvation.

Just like the Israelites hid in their holes and paneled their homes, or just like the religious people clung to their laws, or Hiro Noda stuck with his orders.

We look for things that can save us, like our boss's approval, where if he will like us enough, then we can have freedom.

Or maybe it's our grades at school. Or perhaps it's the love of our friends and our family, and we serve these things hoping that they will free us. But if God is our hope, if what Jesus says is true, that there is freedom, then our work can be different.

[32 : 51] It means that when we're stuck between a terrible boss and tough working hours, we can look and know that our God hasn't abandoned us, that he's there, that we know that we can pass our exams at school, or we can fail them spectacularly, because either way, God's love is enough, and he will provide, and he says that you are free.

And he says, this hope in God propels us into mission, because when we see our hope, when our lives are rejoicing in our difficulty, when our lives are rejoicing in our struggle, we can look up, and we can see other people who are trapped, slaves to their work, to others' approval, slaves to the struggles that they're facing today.

We can look up and see the things that we've been talking about the past couple of weeks. We can look up to the thirsty, and we can tell them where to find true water, true life.

We can look to the outsiders, those who are ignored by others, and bring them in to a family where they are loved and accepted. We can go out, and we can see injustice, and because our hope is not in our ability to do something about it, but in God who promises to right the wrongs.

We can love those who have been treated unjustly. If our mission is fueled by our own motivation, we're going to fail.

[34 : 38] But if our mission as a church is fueled by God's hope, then we can do amazing things, rejoicing in God and knowing that he is in control.

When you go to work, and you see someone who comes in like, it's the end of the week, and it's only Monday, or they look defeated at their desk the moment they sit down, what hope can you share with them?

How can your friendships and relationships be different as you're pointing people to the true satisfaction? What about the disadvantaged people in your neighborhood?

How can your community group go out and share hope and share freedom and share love with these people? What about the mother in your child's play group who looks like there's no hope?

Or the neighbor across the hallway who's just lost their spouse to cancer? All of our lives can be about God's mission because in every moment, in every struggle, in every sadness, we know that

we have received this message of hope, good news for the poor, freedom for captives.

[36 : 10] Jesus says in Isaiah 61 that God's Spirit is upon him to bring good news. And if we are God's children, then God's Spirit is on us so we can proclaim good news to the poor and liberty to the captives, that we can bring comfort to the morning.

We can look to those around us and say that there is true freedom and hope in Christ, that you don't have to fight your war anymore because Christ has done it.

You don't have to search and look for love because God has all that you need, that you don't have to be perfect because he gives you forgiveness.

Let's pray. Father God, I thank you for your good news. I thank you that you speak to us in our trapped lives, in our hopelessness, in our slavery.

And you say that we can come to you, that we can find hope, that we can find relief. And I thank you for the words that you share with us in Isaiah 61, that you have brought good news.

[37 : 31] I pray that we would be people who receive this good news, who are shaped by your great love for us, who are shaped by the amazing freedom and hope that you give us in Jesus.

In his name, amen.