

Isaiah 61:1-2

Sermon: **Priests of God**

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INTRODUCTION

1. Last time, we did not study Isaiah 61, so today we will spend some time in that passage. But before we enter Isaiah 61, let me give a short introduction. After His baptism and temptation, Jesus begins His ministry. Having spent several months in Galilee, performing miracles and teaching in their synagogues, He decides to return to the place where He grew up. In Nazareth, as was His custom, Jesus enters the synagogue. The leaders of the synagogue grant Him the honor of reading from the scroll, and the passage happens to be from Isaiah 61. After reading, Jesus sits down, and the people—having already heard what He had done in Galilee—look at Him intently, waiting for Him to teach. But Jesus does not do what they expected. He tells His people that He is the One of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke. An unbelievably powerful and dramatic statement! I can only imagine the looks on the faces of those sitting in the synagogue. After His declaration, they become enraged and decide to throw Him off a cliff to kill Him. But Jesus walks through their midst and escapes—I believe, through the supernatural intervention of God.

LOOKING BACK

2. Let's go back in time for a moment. Before the prophet Isaiah, we have the long and rich history of the people of Israel. We have the time of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—whom God called Israel. From Jacob came the twelve tribes. These tribes dwelt in Egypt for centuries, where they multiplied and became a great nation. Then came the time of Moses, who, by the hand of Yahweh, delivered the people out of Egypt. Moses led them into the wilderness, where they received God's commandments by which they were to live. After the wilderness, Yahweh brought His people into the Promised Land, the land He had sworn to give to their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In that land came the period of the judges, and then the time of the kings. During the reign of the kings, Yahweh sent prophets to warn Israel of the hardness and rebellion of their hearts. Yet Israel as a nation never listened to the prophets, and because of this Yahweh sent them into exile, into the Babylonian kingdom. After some time, Yahweh chose to bring His people back to the Promised Land. Why did He do this? Because of the promises He had made to their fathers: *"I will make you into a*

great nation, Abraham¹” and *“I will be the God of you and your descendants after you².”* Sadly, even after returning to the land, the people of Israel never loved God as their fathers once did. Up until the time of Jesus, they remained a nation with hardened hearts toward Yahweh. There were always individuals whose hearts were tender toward God, but as a people they never loved Yahweh with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

2.1. The prophet Isaiah lived during the time of the kings of Israel—before the exile into Babylon.

2.2. Now we enter the passage. **(Isaiah 61:1–2)** *“The Spirit of the Lord Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of Yahweh’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn in Zion...”*

PRIESTS OF GOD

3. In Isaiah 61 we read about the One who is to come, the Anointed of Yahweh. From the text itself it is clear that this is a messianic passage, and Jesus Himself in Luke’s Gospel declares that He is the One about whom the prophet Isaiah wrote. Let us recall: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist; Elizabeth, John’s mother; the angel Gabriel; Simeon from the Temple—all of them prophesied that the One was coming who would fulfill the promise made long ago to the fathers. When we study their songs of praise, we see that they are the introduction to what Jesus is now declaring about Himself. They understood that the One was coming who would teach them how to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words: Jesus would teach them what God requires of them if they one day wish to become that “great nation” promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

3.1. In Isaiah 61:2 it says: “To proclaim the year of Yahweh’s favor.” What does this mean, and for what time in the future is this prophecy intended? As I mentioned earlier in my sermons: throughout history, Israel as a nation has been rebellious against its God. For God to fulfill the promise He made to Abraham—“I will be their God, and they will be My people”—a great deal of forgiveness must take place on God’s part. Just as forgiveness is extended to us Gentiles through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, so it must also be for Israel: for them to one day be God’s people, Yahweh must forgive them for all the transgressions they have committed against Him over thousands of years. The Jews, like us Gentiles, will be pardoned because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. Yahweh will turn their unfaithful hearts into faithful ones, as it is written in **(Malachi 3:24)**: *“He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”*

3.1.1. In this time of forgiveness will also come days of vengeance, as it says in Isaiah 61:2. God will then judge His people for their past, and only those who possess the heart of the fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—will be pardoned. With the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth, they will reign with Him and be called “Priests of Yahweh³.” The great nation God promised Abraham will not

¹ Genesis 12:2

² Genesis 17:7

³ Isaiah 61:6

only be great in number—it will be the most righteous, the holiest, and the most merciful nation ever to exist in human history. They will be admired by all surrounding nations.

3.2. Notice that Jesus, in His declaration, did not say: *“To proclaim the year of Yahweh’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God”*—as it is written in Isaiah 61:2. Instead, as we read in Luke 4:19, He said only: *“To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* Why did He omit “the day of vengeance”? I believe Jesus knew that He had to die on the cross, and for that reason God has “paused” the day of vengeance until the second coming of Jesus to the earth. Knowing this, Jesus deliberately left out that part when He spoke to His fellow countrymen in the synagogue.

THE ONLY HEALER WE NEED

4. In Isaiah 61:1 it is written: “For Yahweh has anointed me; He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted.” And in Luke 4:18 we read: “To bring good news to the poor.” Who are those with broken hearts? What do the poor look like? If we are people who will do everything to make this life about our personal satisfaction; if our main motivation is to achieve our best life here and now; if we believe health is the highest good, that family, friendship, and career success are the ultimate reasons we exist; if we openly promote immoral things in the society around us while still thinking of ourselves as religious—then Jesus’ teaching will not be attractive to us. His Good News will hold little to no value in our eyes. But if we are people who have come to realize that this world cannot give us what we were truly created for, that nothing in it can satisfy a poor heart longing for something greater and more glorious, then the Good News will be a pearl we guard in our hearts until the day it is fully realized — and the same was true for the Jews of that time.

4.1. Sadly, we are all surrounded by people—and perhaps once were such ourselves—who seek satisfaction in the things this world offers: drugs, alcohol, gambling, power, wealth, sexual perversions, career success... Yet in the end we are left empty. The dose increases, but the effect diminishes. Why is that so? Because this world was not created to satisfy us. Because we do not want the One who alone can fill our hearts completely. Since we were created for something greater, we instinctively seek it elsewhere. We cannot help it—it is stronger than us. But everything else leads to ruin. Only He leads to life, and those who realize this in this life—live it. They shine. They are free from this world. They are poor in heart because they know that without God they remain poor. King David understood this very well, which is why he wrote in **(Psalm 62:6-7)**: *“Truly my soul finds rest in God; my hope comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken”*

4.2. Earlier I mentioned that family and friendships cannot fully satisfy us. I don’t want to be misunderstood—family and friendships are extremely important for our social and psychological well-being. We must nurture them, invest patience, attention, and love. But they are not the relationships that can fully satisfy a poor heart. That can only be done by God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. If, along with them, we also have the privilege of building relationships with other Christians who share the same perspective, then over time those relationships become the true family and friendships that God intended for us from the very beginning. These are eternal relationships. I believe this is what Jesus meant when He said in Luke 8:21: *“My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.”*

ONLY THEN WILL YOU BE GOD'S PEOPLE

5. Let us continue with Isaiah 61:1: "To proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners." These further statements of the prophet Isaiah are subheadings of the first verse we already read. They are, in fact, a description of what will happen with the coming of the Messiah. It is possible that this refers to spiritual liberation—the freedom from sin that the Good News brings to all who receive it. We know that at Christ's second coming we will be given "new bodies" in which sin will no longer exist⁴. Furthermore, Jesus says in Luke 4:18: *"Recovery of sight for the blind."* We know that in His first coming Jesus literally restored sight to the blind, and it is entirely possible that these words point directly to that. But if we follow the context of everything we have said so far, and if we try to enter the mindset of Zechariah, Isaiah, or Mary—the mother of Jesus—then these statements carry another, deeper meaning for the Jewish people.

5.1. The truth is, throughout most of their history the Jewish people were under the rule of some pagan empire: Babylon, Persia, Alexander the Great, and now Rome. Jesus is telling them here that the day will come when, as a nation, they will be freed from the oppression of other kingdoms. The day will come when the "captives" will be able to worship Yahweh freely, and when they themselves will become the light of righteousness shining in the midst of all nations on earth. They will become a strong nation before whom all other kingdoms will bow. Why? Because Yahweh Himself will protect them. How? By sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to come a second time and rule with justice and an iron scepter. At that time no one will be able to harm them. I believe this is what Jesus is alluding to here.

5.2. But what then does "recovery of sight for the blind" mean? Who are the blind? As I mentioned earlier, throughout their history the Jewish people were spiritually blind to Yahweh. We know from Zechariah's song of praise that he himself declared of his people: *"To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace"*⁵. And who will guide Israel's feet into the path of peace? "The Rising Sun," "Jesus Christ," "the Messiah," "the Son of God," "the Son of Man." All these are titles for the One who was to come—and He would come bringing teaching. That teaching would show every Jew how Yahweh truly wants to be worshiped; it would teach them what the faith of a true Israelite looks like, one who sincerely carries Yahweh in his heart.

5.3. Through His life, His works, and His words, Jesus would show what a true Israelite should be—a priest of God shining before the nations. And this is the meaning of Jesus' declaration: *"You, who for thousands of years have been blind as a people—now I bring light so that you may see and open your spiritual eyes. Only when you become true Israelites—and I will show you what that looks like—then Yahweh will fulfill His promise made to your fathers. Only then will Yahweh make you into a great nation."*

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:51-53

⁵ Luke 1:79