

The Robe of Righteousness

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 | Psalm 126 | 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 | John 1:6-8, 19-28

ISAIAH 61:1-11

¹ The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. ⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵ Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; ⁶ but you shall be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. ⁷ Because their shame was double, and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. ⁸ For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. ¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

INTRODUCTION

As some of you heard me say on Wednesday, I have been enjoying our few ventures into the prophet Isaiah over the last month or so. It's such a rich and challenging book. And so, as we turn to our Isaiah reading, here is what we will learn today: The glorious return of the Lord demands righteousness. The glorious return of the Lord demands righteousness.

To see this, we will need to remember a bit of the context. The opening 39 chapters of the book establish the theme of judgment, particularly the Day of the Lord in which God will execute his judgment against his people for their many and varied sins. They have been selfish, idolatrous, evil, exploitative people, and God is about to hand them over to exile, to slavery in a foreign land, as a punishment for their sins. But the second section of the book, chapters 40-55, begin to establish what happens after the punishment is given. There is, in fact, a hope of restoration. Through a suffering servant, atonement will be made and God will return his presence to his people. The third section of the book, chapters 56-66, the one in which our passage is found, begins to explore what the implications of that restoration are, what it will look like for God's people to be restored. And that's where we begin to understand our passage. What will this restoration look like?

1. THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOUR

One of the chief implications is the re-establishment of righteousness. But it is introduced in a somewhat unexpected way. The opening 6 verses show that the Lord's anointed one will come and teach, make declarations, and, in particular, proclaim the year of the Lord's favour—the

year of jubilee. In the Pentateuch, God establishes a pattern in which every 50 years, there is a cancelling of all debts, slaves are freed, and property which was sold out desperation is returned to the original owner. It was meant to establish a firm understanding of the Lord's mercy to an undeserving people. And it is described in just this way here in Isaiah, which makes sense given that the theme of this part of the book is restoration. But interestingly, the year of the Lord's favour is also the day of the Lord's vengeance. It is a time of abundant provision and grace, and yet it is also the day in which the Lord sets things right. Those whom he will restore are brought home, but his enemies face his wrath. These are two sides of the same coin. The Lord's blessing demands a foundation of justice and righteousness.

2. THE DOUBLE PORTION

This brings us to the second section, verses 7-9. The blessing that comes in the year of the Lord's favour is a double portion—a double portion that corresponds to the double portion of hard service, of punishing exile, that was referenced back in chapter 40 (you might have heard on Wednesday this last week).¹ But even here, the double portion of blessing and everlasting joy (verse 7) is intertwined with the justice of God (verse 8). The blessing, the restoration, is on the foundation of atonement, and so it is free for his people, but not without cost. The vengeance of God is still required in order to establish righteousness. How is this possible? How can the year of the Lord's favour also be the Day of the Lord's vengeance? It's possible because of who makes this declaration in the first place. The person establishing all of this is the Lord's anointed—*anointed* literally meaning *Messiah*. The bringing about of the Lord's great mercy is inaugurated by his Messiah. And this happened when Jesus Christ came. Indeed, in Luke's Gospel, this is precisely how he introduced himself—how his ministry was introduced—he read from these verses in the synagogue. And when asked about his reading, he responded: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*² How? How did Jesus meet God's justice and establish the Lord's favour for his people, the return from exile and the restoration of relationship? He did it by taking the final punishment for his people, by paying the debt, by 'giving his life as a ransom.'³ God's abundant grace is given, and yet his wrath is satisfied. It's a day of justice for Christ Jesus, and a day of mercy for us.

3. REJOICING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

Finally, and here's what I really want you to take away—it's not just righteousness before God that is established in the gospel by Christ Jesus. It's not just about restoring relationship, but righteousness itself. The last two verses rightly start and with rejoicing in God that he has given salvation through his Messiah. But it is not just praise that is established, but righteousness itself. And we have seen this idea throughout the passage, back in verse 3, twice here in verses 10-11, and the reference to justice in verse 8. God doesn't just save his people, but saves them to live in a way that declares, propagates, and exercises his righteousness. Paul later talks about this in Philippians. For those who are found in Christ, they have not *"a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith."*⁴ Paul is telling us that if we believe that Christ died for us, and so satisfied God's righteousness, then he gives us access to his righteousness, also by faith, that we may live in a

¹ Isa 40:2.

² Luke 4:18-21.

³ Mark 10:45.

⁴ Phil 3:9.

way pleasing to God. The glorious return of the Lord demands righteousness. The restoration of our relationship with God, through faith, means we are to live in righteous ways.

CONCLUSION

Let us consider this as Advent comes to a close, as we continue to meditate on what it means for Christ Jesus, the Lord's Messiah, to have come and to come again. I actually think this is what Charles Wesley, the great 18th century theologian and hymn writer (possibly with help from George Whitefield, also a theologian) was considering as he penned the third verse to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth.
Hark, the herald angels sing
glory to the new-born King.⁵

Christ's advent brings us salvation, the Lord's mercy, through faith. But it also brings us righteousness, the requirement to live righteously—light and life—also through faith.

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, that righteousness might be established. Help to live in faith that we might live rightly according to your Word. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

⁵ Charles Wesley, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739).