

Lesson 41 Isaiah 61:1-9 The Favorable Year of the Lord

Introduction

Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me..." (Luke 4:17-18).

Every Sunday morning in countries across the world men and women stand up to read the text of Scripture. The reading of the God's Word usually precedes an interpretation or sermon on the Word. That tradition flows quite naturally from the synagogue practice of Jesus' day. On one particular Sabbath day, Jesus was invited to be the reader. He did not choose the Biblical book he would read from. A synagogue official prepared for Him the scroll of Isaiah. Taking the scroll, Jesus chose which text He would read. He scrolled down to Isaiah 61:1-2, which begins, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor..." Who is this anointed one Isaiah speaks of? Having completed the reading and taken His seat with all eyes fixed on Him, Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21).

Who is the Anointed One? Jesus is the Anointed One. He is the Messianic Son of Isaiah 9. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He is the Anointed Conqueror of Isaiah 61.

We have already seen a tight connection between the Anointed Conqueror and the glory of God's people. The divine warrior and anointed mediator of chapter 59 were followed by a description of a glorious Zion in chapter 60. A similar connection is made in 61:1-9. The Anointed One liberates and transforms Zion. In our study of chapter 60, we recognized an ideal Zion that will not exist until our sin nature is removed and the New Heaven and New Earth are established. So, we might ask of Jesus, "How much of this prophecy was fulfilled on that Sabbath day when you stood to read?"

Jesus may have given some indication on how to answer that question in the way He quoted Isaiah. His quote is not straightforward. He has added something; He has changed something; and He has left something out.

Let's first go through the passage as it is in Isaiah, paying attention to the connection between the Anointed Conqueror and the people he came to liberate. Then we will come back to Luke and see what we can learn from the way Jesus quoted this text. The passage is not long, so I will read the whole together, just pointing out one division in the text as we go.

Isaiah 61:1-9 Transforming Power, Present and Future

We start with 61:1-3. The first-person declaration of the Anointed One to bring liberty to God's people.

¹ The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, To bring good news to the afflicted; To proclaim liberty to captives	Because the LORD has anointed me He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, And freedom to prisoners;
² To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD To comfort all who mourn,	And the day of vengeance of our God;
³ To grant those who mourn in Zion, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, So they will be called oaks of righteousness,	Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.

We then shift in verses 4-9 to a confirmation of the Anointed One's work, describing a transformed people and ending with a first-person affirmation from Yahweh.

⁴ Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, And they will repair the ruined cities,	They will raise up the former devastations; The desolations of many generations.
⁵ Strangers will stand And foreigners will be your farmers	and pasture your flocks, and your vinedressers.
⁶ But you will be called the priests of the LORD; You will eat the wealth of nations,	You will be spoken of as ministers of our God. And in their riches you will boast.

Luke is writing in Greek. So, he had to translate Jesus' words. Mostly he uses the recognized Jewish translation of the Old Testament into Greek called, "the Septuagint." One of the differences between the two Biblical texts is Luke's phrase, "to preach the gospel to the poor," and Isaiah's phrase, "to bring good news to the afflicted." The differences in these two phrases is an example that is probably accounted for by translation. So "good news" and "gospel," those are synonyms; and the word for, "poor," in Greek is a valid option for translating the Hebrew word, "afflicted." So, there is no significant problem with the differences in that phrase.

There are three more significant differences for us to consider. These three differences consist of something changed, something added, and something left out. We'll start with something changed.

Something changed

Luke has the phrase, "recovery of sight to the blind," instead of, "freedom of prisoners." And for us it comes out quite different. Recovery of sight to the blind versus freedom of prisoners – that's not at all the same thing. This is a difference that occurs in the Septuagint that Luke is quoting from. So the change is not really made by Luke. The change is made in the Greek translation that Luke is using. And so, we might wonder how do you get from, "freedom of prisoners," to, "recovery of sight to the blind"? Scholar D. W. Pao believes the Septuagint "may have provided a legitimate rendering of the clause." So he is arguing that the Hebrew text is unclear at this point, and maybe to take whatever metaphor is being used in the Hebrew to take that to mean, "freedom of prisoners," or to take that to mean, "recovery of sight to the blind."² Problem whenever we are translating a text is that, just sometimes, the phrase we are looking at can have two significantly different meanings and the translator has to choose one, and the typical understanding we get from the Hebrew goes one direction, but the translators from Hebrew to Greek went a different direction. I am not equipped to have an opinion on the range of possible interpretations in the original Hebrew. I don't know Hebrew, I can't make a comment. I can say that I am familiar with the difficulty of translation. I can also observe that recovery of sight to the blind is an idea associated with Zion earlier in Isaiah, in the Book of the King. It's also connected in that context with the proclamation of good news and with coming vengeance. So we see this collection of ideas earlier in Isaiah 35:4-6.

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| ⁴ Say to those with anxious heart,
Behold, your God will come <i>with</i> vengeance; | "Take courage, fear not.
The recompense of God will come, but He will save you." |
| ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened | and the ears of the deaf be unstopped. |
| ⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer,
For waters will break forth in the wilderness | And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.
And streams in the Arabah. |

So the Septuagint version that Luke is using with the "recover of sight for the blind" finds expression earlier in Isaiah 35. That's linked to Isaiah 61 and, interestingly, Jesus Himself seems to link those two passages together at a different point in His ministry, when He is encouraging John the Baptist that He is, indeed, the Messiah. He's going to say, "The blind see and the deaf hear."

Something added

So that's the first curious difference in the text. A second significant difference has to do with something added. Luke inserts the phrase, "to let the oppressed go free." Again, the phrase certainly fits the context, but it is not the same idea as setting free captives or prisoners. Scholars believe it is an insertion from 58:6 where Isaiah is describing the kind of fasting God desires like this. This is what God desires, "to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free." That last bit is the actual phrase that is inserted into Luke 4:18.

And I think we do not really know did Jesus insert the phrase or did Luke insert the phrase as part of his narration. Luke already seems to have shortened the text read by Jesus, assuming Jesus would

² D. W. Pao and E. J. Schnabel. "Luke" in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 288.

have read more than two verses when He stood up for a Sabbath reading. It is possible that Jesus read more, but Luke just quoted this final part. And if Jesus did read more than two verses, how much more did He read? Could Jesus have read from chapter 58 all the way through chapter 61? And if He did, Did Luke conflate the text to include a phrase from the beginning of His reading with the powerful declaration that occurred just before Jesus sat down, the end of the reading? Or did Jesus conflate the texts Himself as He read to bring in the whole context of the text? Kind of like you find in the Targum. You know, He is reading the text but adding some explanatory words to bring fuller meaning. We cannot answer that question. Whether it was Jesus or Luke, the result is a conflation, that is, a bringing together of 58:6 and 61:1-2 that connects the description of the Anointed One in 61:1-2 with the desire of God for His people in chapter 58.

Okay, so we've looked at a phrase that was changed - the blind see - and something added - the oppressed go free. Now let's look at something that's left out. And what is left out seems to me to be very significant.

Something left out

Actually, there are two things left out. Luke does not have the phrase, "to bind up the broken-hearted." I do not see any great significance with that omission. Luke could have simply reduced the amount of text he chose to quote from Jesus, especially since he added in a phrase, so he dropped out a phrase. Or Jesus could have chosen to drop out a phrase when He added in the phrase. It's not clear.

The second omission does seem to communicate an important truth about the ministry of Jesus. Verse 2 ends in Isaiah with the Anointed Conqueror coming...

To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD And the day of vengeance of our God;

The version Jesus reads omits, "the day of vengeance of our God," stopping with the first phrase only, "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." When Jesus sits down and says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," the emphasis is on the favorable year, not the day of vengeance.

In fact, the entire passage of 61:1-9, and really this whole middle section from chapters 60-62, focuses on favor to Israel and not on vengeance against God's enemies. That idea is there. The parallel Divine Warrior sections in 59 and 63 do communicate coming wrath. And judgment does find a central place in the glory of Zion poem in chapter 60, where we are assured in verse 12 that the nation and kingdom which will not serve Zion will perish and be utterly ruined.

But that's not giving any kind of lengthy descriptions like we saw back in the Book of the Servant. The lengthy descriptions in 60-62 focus on the liberation and transformation of God's people: glory of Zion. And in these chapters, Jesus chose a quote that emphasizes the proclamation of good news. That good news is good news of liberation from captivity, from blindness, and from oppression, which is then summed up with the phrase, "he has come to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." The idea of favor overlaps the idea of grace. In the Biblical context the two words are synonymous. So we have this emphasis on favor, and on Jesus proclaiming that favor, proclaiming good news, proclaiming liberation, proclaiming grace.

And that's what we have come to expect from Jesus as we read through the Gospels: that He has this ministry of preaching and teaching Good News. It's not what the first-century people of God expected of Jesus. Not if He was truly the Messiah. They have read the prophecies. They connected the coming of the Messiah with a defeat of the wicked and the establishment of a glorious, earthly Zion. You know, the things we've been reading about in chapter 60. Liberation follows a conquest. For good to triumph, evil must be eliminated. Jesus ought to be a warrior and He ought to have political goals – if He is the Messiah.

Jesus understood the confusion of His followers. It's in Luke 7:20 that John the Baptist asks Jesus, "Are you really the One?" John doubts himself. He is not sure that he has understood rightly. He thought he did at the beginning, and he was preaching a ministry of righteousness. But he is looking

at Jesus, and he is in prison. He thinks he knows what the Messiah is supposed to be about. But he is confused by Jesus' lack of religious, military, or political ambition. Jesus is not acting like a messianic king. And so Jesus responds to John by quoting Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1. He sent this message back to John, "Tell him, 'The blind receive sight and the poor have the gospel preached to them.'" Jesus is saying, pay attention to what you have seen and what you do know. I am who you think I am, even if I am carrying out my mission differently than you thought I would.

And this is not because Jesus fails to see Himself as the Anointed Conqueror. Jesus separates His mission as the Messiah into a first coming and a second coming. Later in Luke 21:22 Jesus affirms "days of vengeance" are coming. He also tells His followers in 21:27 that they will see Him return in a very different manner than they were experiencing Him now. In this first coming He came as a baby and grew up a humble carpenter. He came among us as one of us. At His second coming, Jesus says, "They will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." The later revelation of John the Apostle is going to describe Jesus at His second coming as a divine warrior, as a king, as a judge, as a conqueror.

And this separation by Jesus of His Messianic work into two comings helps us understand the divine figures described by Isaiah. The Book of the King introduced the Messianic son of David. The Messiah will conquer evil and He will establish His reign over a transformed Zion just as we have read here in the Book of the Conqueror. But before that day can come, the Book of the Servant taught us the Messiah must die. He must first suffer and die for the sake of His people. The Messiah is both: the Suffering Servant and the Anointed Conqueror. Jesus is fulfilling the role of the Suffering Servant in His first role. He will fill the role of the Anointed Conqueror when He comes again.

Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled

When Jesus sat down and proclaimed, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," I think He was declaring that the prophetic role of the Messiah has been fulfilled. I think He is referring to the prophecy about prophecy; that Isaiah said a prophet would rise up and he would declare good news. This is the prophetic role of the Messiah. That's what's been fulfilled. Jesus was anointed to preach good news, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. That is what He has been doing among them. That's what He is doing this Sabbath day. He came as the Word to reveal the glory of God and announce God's Kingdom plan.

He fulfilled the prophesy that a prophet would come and prophecy. That does not in any way suggest that Jesus saw Himself as merely a prophet. Some people get thrown off there. Jesus didn't just come to reveal the truth of God. The Messiah is king, priest, and prophet. He is the rare prophet who mediates a New Covenant. Even more uniquely, He is the one prophet who speaks the Word of God as the Word of God Himself. He is one with the Father.

So, He fulfilled the prophetic role announced ahead of time by Isaiah. He is also the subject of His own prophecy. He proclaims the Good News; He brings about the Good News, and He is the Good News. He will conquer sin and death on the cross to release the people of God from captivity to sin, to give His people spiritual sight, to free His people from spiritual oppression. That liberation transforms us now to begin to live for Him now. To live free of sin, to love our neighbor, to care for the poor and outcast. But that transformation has not brought about this glorious vision of Zion that is described here. He is going to come again to fulfill the role of the Anointed Conqueror that we read about in Isaiah 60-62. He is not just going to give us power over sin. He is going to abolish sin. He is going to remove death. He is going to eliminate mourning. He is going to establish Zion. That is a earthly kingdom in which He reigns. He is going to bring us into the blessing of everlasting covenant with God because our sin nature will be removed. We will be able to live forever in the righteous presence of the Holy One of Israel. As Messiah, He first came as Suffering Servant, but He is coming again as Anointed Conqueror.

We are going to get more on Jesus as Divine Warrior in our next lesson, where we're going to finish out this middle section of the last third of Isaiah: the Book of the Anointed Conqueror.