

Sermon Series:

Who is this man?

Jesus' early ministry (Luke 3-9)

GOD'S PLAN FOR RESTORATION – Luke 4:14-44; Isaiah 61:1-3,9-11

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What is your purpose for living in this stage of your life? Have you ever thought about it? Why has God left you still here on the earth? We may be able to state a general purpose for our lives, but our exact purpose may change during different stages of our lives. When my son was a baby, it seemed that my main purpose in life was to keep him alive and not mess him up too much! Although some things remain the same, I'd talk about my purpose very differently today.

If you do a search on the internet on "finding your purpose", you'll discover a multitude of resources about the importance of having a purpose for your life, how to find your purpose and design a purpose statement, and examples of purpose statements of famous people. For instance, Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Computers, says, "We're here to put a dent in the universe. Otherwise, why even be here?". Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin empire, says his purpose in life is "To have fun in my journey through life and learn from my mistakes". Walt Disney had a simple purpose - "To make people happy".

From a Christian perspective, the Westminster Shorter Catechism says that the chief end or purpose of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Mother Teresa, who worked with the poor and dying in India said, "We do our work for Jesus and with Jesus and to Jesus, . . . and that's what keeps it simple." Bringing it closer to home, our church's stated purpose is to be "an older yet robust community of God's people who are learning to believe, live, and share God's gracious salvation in Jesus Christ that leads to life in Him." Thinking about our purpose helps us to make decisions about what to do and how to do it, both individually and together.

Luke begins his account of Jesus' ministry by telling us how He understood His purpose and gives us some examples of how this played out in the things he chose to do. Luke wants us to understand that Jesus was sent by God with a message of restoration to be experienced now and in the future.

Sent by God ...

As Jesus heads into his public ministry, we read:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit ... (v. 14)

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me ... He has sent me to proclaim ... (v. 18)

Luke again emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry. Everything Jesus does comes from the life of the Spirit within Him. The Spirit is the source of His wisdom and power. In the Old Testament, kings and prophets were anointed by having oil poured over their heads as a visual representation of the Holy Spirit coming upon them to enable them to do the job to which God has called them. Jesus was anointed at His baptism as the Holy Spirit descended on Him. And what was Jesus' job? He was sent to proclaim the message which God had been sending people ever since they turned away from Him in the Garden of Eden, a message of restoration. Jesus would proclaim it and demonstrate it throughout His life and then He would make its implementation possible through His death and resurrection.

Throughout His life, we will see God's control over the progression and timing of Jesus' ministry. The Spirit will guide Him to certain places and people. The Spirit will tell Him what to say in each circumstance. The Spirit will protect Jesus from the devil's attempts to derail His mission. We see this at the end of Jesus' visit to His hometown. An angry mob seeks to kill Jesus, but He just walks away unharmed. It is not the right time or setting for Jesus' death. The Spirit is in control.

... with a message of restoration ...

Jesus was given a message to proclaim, a message of reconciliation. You'll notice that the passage repeats the word "proclaim" three times. Jesus was sent:

... to proclaim good news to the poor
... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

Let's look at each of these things.

1. "good news to the poor"

The term "poor" here does not mean just those who are economically disadvantaged, although it does include them. In a broader sense, this would have been understood as referring to anyone who was disadvantaged in any way, including those who had low social status like slaves and women and those rejected by others such as lepers, the tax collectors or Gentiles. The poor were any who were looked down upon, those who were considered outsiders. Jesus came to proclaim an invitation to live in God's kingdom where nobody is "poor", where all were equal and valued by God.

We can see this playing out in the attitude of his neighbours in Nazareth. They are impressed by His teaching. I expect most of them felt a bit like we do when our children or grandchildren perform in the school musical or are given an award for academic or sporting excellence – rather proud of the good job we did in raising such a star! Because of their relationship with Him, they expect privileged access to His miracles. The saying, “Physician, heal yourself!”, voiced an expectation that a person would take care of their own family and friends first. However, Jesus knows that those considered “poor” are often more open to God’s working than those who are in a privileged position. The Gentile widow trusted Elijah to provide food and the Gentile Naaman trusted Elisha to heal his leprosy. They were outsiders, but were willing to admit they were needy (although it took a while for Naaman to get to that realisation!) and therefore God was able to work in their lives. The people in Nazareth were proud insiders and Jesus couldn’t work there.

As I think about our congregation, I am sure that few if any of us would classify ourselves as “poor” in an economic sense. While we’re not rich by Australian standards, if we’re careful with our money, we’re not in danger of living on the street or going without food. However, we’re all Gentiles, and so would have been considered “poor” by the Jews. Over half of us are women, and so are considered lesser humans by some. And without Christ, all of us are “poor” spiritually, unable to save ourselves or live as God intended. We need God’s “good news” of salvation as much as anyone and He is happy to provide it – if we will admit our need.

2. “freedom for the prisoners”

The word “freedom” is often also translated as “release” or “liberation”. Next week is the 80th anniversary of D-Day – the landing of Allied forces in Normandy which was the beginning of the end of World War II. Over the next 6-9 months, as the Allied forces pushed into areas occupied by the Germans from the east and the west, they came across something that shocked the world. The advancing forces discovered and liberated hundreds of thousands of prisoners in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. The pictures of those who survived are too difficult to look at for long. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to be those soldiers who saw it first-hand – and of course the prisoners who lived through it. This was a unique liberation of prisoners who were being destroyed by an extreme form of cruel captivity.

We may have difficulty identifying ourselves with these prisoners. However, I think if we could really see the damage done to our hearts and minds by sin, we would realise that without Christ, we are just as destroyed. Sin blinds us and covers us with its darkness. Sin breaks us – the word translated as “oppressed” means something that has been broken and trodden on. We have been enslaved and destroyed by sin and its effects. We might look good on the outside, but our hearts are as emaciated as the concentration camp survivors. How wonderful to know that Jesus came to liberate us from this prison of sin.

3. “the year of the Lord’s favour”

But He didn’t stop there. He also came to restore us. The “year of the Lord’s favour” refers to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee. Every 50th year, they were to let the land lie fallow so that it could rest and rejuvenate. But it didn’t stop there. In those days, if you went into debt, you would sell some of the family property or even sell yourself as a servant in order to raise the money needed to pay back the debts. However, in the Year of Jubilee, all property was to revert to the original family owners and all servants were to be freed. Therefore, the “sales” were really leases, not absolute sales, and the amount of money raised reflected the number of years until the next Year of Jubilee. The idea behind this was to make sure that families did not permanently lose their inheritance of land, that families were not locked into servitude, and that the wealth was not consolidated into the hands of a few people. The Year of Jubilee was a year in which people had a chance to start over again. There was a chance to restore livelihoods and reset fortunes. We don’t know how this was actually practiced as we have no records of it happening. But it was a picture of restoration and renewal that was important to prophets as they thought about what it would take to have society become what God intended it to be.

As I’ve mentioned before, Scott and I usually watch Landline on Sunday after church. So many times, over the past year or two, there have been stories of people who have lost their property and livelihoods due to changing weather patterns or rising costs and uncertain sales. Sometimes, these are properties which have been worked for generations by the same family. Sometimes it has meant walking away from the property with nothing left in the bank with which to start again. It is no surprise that the suicide rates among farmers is among the highest in the country. But what if next year, all debts were cancelled, and the land reverted to the generational owners, and they had a chance to start all over again? It would be very hard work, but the reset would give them the opportunity to give it another go – they would have hope. This was the intention of the Year of Jubilee. It wouldn’t work for us now because our economy is very different to that of the Kingdom of Israel three or four thousand years ago. But you get the idea. It is this kind of reset that God gives us. Our sin is cancelled, we are freed from the power of sin and given the opportunity to experience a new life in Christ.

You could sum up the message that Jesus came to give people as follows:

God, through Jesus, invites everyone, even the outsiders, into His new kingdom where they will find release from the bondage and destruction of sin and restoration into the life God intends for them.

... to be experienced now and in the future.

When Jesus finished reading this passage from Isaiah, he said,

“Today this scripture is fulfilled (brought to completion) in your hearing.” (v. 21)

For thousands of years, God had been speaking through the prophets, promising to provide a way to be released and restored. He had been preparing them, showing their need and the futility of every other way. Now, in Jesus, God's plan is reaching its completion. His death and resurrection will make it all possible.

As we read the original passage from Isaiah, you may have noticed that Jesus stopped His reading in the middle of a sentence. It goes on to say,

*... and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn ...
(Isaiah 61:2)*

Why did He stop when He did? Because He knew that He wasn't going to finish His work in His first coming to earth. When Jesus died and rose again to free us from the power and guilt of sin, it was a wonderful victory. But sin has brought great brokenness to our lives that needs healing and restoring. We live in a world which has been twisted and broken by sin and this impacts our lives every day.

As I think about those prisoners who were released from the Nazi camps, I know that their lives didn't change overnight. Even after liberation, many of them died from the years of malnutrition and abuse. It would have taken months of good nutrition and medical care for them to reach a more normal weight. And some would never fully recover from the psychological trauma of their captivity. But they were free and that was an important first step.

Isaiah talks about two things still to come in our restoration. Firstly, we read that He will come to bring *"the day of vengeance of our God"*. As we read this, it is important not to confuse vengeance with vindictiveness and revenge. Jesus is not out to "get people" for the wrong they have done. Rather, His job is to hold people accountable for their actions which have gone against His will and hurt others. In the case of the Nazi prison camps, the war crimes trials brought to light the wrong-doing and administered justice. In a greater way, one day, Jesus will be the true and fair Judge and all wrongs done will be made right.

Secondly, Jesus will bring comfort. This comfort will help to lift us out of the despair of death and into the joy of new life.

*... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:8)*

Do we, as God's people today, experience the fulness of this comfort now? No. We still live in a broken world and still feel its effects. However, the presence of the Holy Spirit does bring God's peace and love into our lives. And one day, we will know the fulness of His comfort. As we read at the very end of the Bible:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes: and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any

mourning, or crying, or pain: for the first things have passed away.” And He who sits on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And He said, “Write, for these things are faithful and true.” (Revelation 20:4-6)

What a day that will be!

One final thought!

Jesus knew His purpose. He was sent by God with a message of restoration for now and into the future. This restoration is for you and me – no matter who we are or what we’ve done, or what has been done to us. God loves the poor and needy. He has come to bring release to us who have been broken by sin. He desires to see us restored to wholeness again. We can come to Him and find forgiveness and healing and hope.

But there is one other thing. Later in the chapter, Isaiah says:

Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed. (Isaiah 61:9)

God’s desire is that the restoration He brings His people will be so wonderful that others will notice the transformation. Others will see how God has released us from sin and is restoring us to wholeness, and they will know that this is something only God can do. It will be a witness to His love and goodness. Doesn’t this give us a purpose for our lives as long as we are alive? Maybe we can’t do much anymore. We can no longer teach Sunday School, or run a missionary outreach, or serve the church in ways we used to do. But we can still be a witness to God’s restoration. We can continue to point people to our loving God who calls all people everywhere to come to Him for release and restoration.