

Have you ever had a sadness that you thought would never end? Maybe you are even experiencing such a sadness right now. Maybe a very close loved one died and a very deep grief has set in. Or maybe you’re not mourning a death but you’ve experienced set-back after set-back after set-back in your career and in your family and in your finances and it’s made you kind of bitter about life. Or maybe something you have done just crushes you. And you think, “I’ll have to live with that for the rest of my life.” What do we do when we find ourselves in a sadness that we fear will never end?

There are different ways that people have dealt with the problem of sadness. A common wise saying is “Time heals all wounds.” And time certainly helps. There’s a lot of truth in that. But time alone is not going solve the problem. Some people turn to harmful things and that just makes the problem worse.

If we’re going to find our way out of sadness it’s going to have to come from somewhere outside of us. It’s going to have to come from God. In our Bible passage for today, Isaiah was talking to a group of people whose whole world had come crashing down around them. The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took the Israelites into captivity in Babylon. The Israelites living in Babylon thought that they would never see happiness again because they would never see their homeland again. And if they did see their homeland again it would make them sad because their city and houses and temple were all in ruins. Their homeland, along with all their hopes and dreams, was a pile of rubble.

Isaiah was addressing a people who found themselves in a dungeon of sadness that they thought they’d never get out of. But then a shaft of light came. And that shaft of light was a voice: **“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (Isaiah 61:1).**<sup>1</sup> Who is talking here? The voice says, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me.” Who is the “me”? Well, one time Jesus went to the Synagogue in Nazareth. And he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him and he unrolled it until he found this very passage of Scripture: **“The Spirit of the LORD is on me” (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18).** And when he had finished reading it he said to the people, **“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).** Jesus was saying, “This passage is about me.”

Jesus is the one talking in this passage from Isaiah: **“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me” (Isaiah 61:1).** “To anoint” means to pour oil on someone’s head. Jesus was anointed, not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit. He says, **“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me.”** Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Remember when Jesus was baptized the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit came down from heaven like a dove. **“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me” (Isaiah 61:1).** In the Old Testament they would anoint people to show that God had set this person apart for a special task. What special task was Jesus set apart for? It says, **“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Isaiah 61:1).** When you are in a sadness that you fear you will never get out of, Jesus was anointed to bring you good news.

**“He sent me to bind up the brokenhearted” (61:1).** I enjoy reading Mother Goose nursery rhymes to my kids. And one of the most famous nursery rhymes is Humpty Dumpty. “Humpty dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty dumpty had a great fall. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, couldn’t put humpty together again.” Like an egg that falls and cracks, sometimes our hearts break and we just don’t think that they can be put back together again. But Jesus came to bind up the brokenhearted. And he CAN put your heart back together again.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations in this sermon are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

**“He sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives. And release from darkness for the prisoners” (61:1).**

Some commentators give this picture. Imagine that you are in a dark dungeon for a long time. And you think that you’re never going to get out. And then you’re set free! And you’ve been in the dungeon so long that your pupils have a hard time dilating to the light. But you’re free!<sup>2</sup>

The Jews in Jesus’ day knew this passage. They were amazed when they realized that the Speaker in this passage is Jesus of Nazareth. We know that the Speaker is Jesus. We’re more so amazed when we realize that the captive is us. We were in a captivity that was never going to end. We were in a dungeon that was going to be for eternity. But Jesus paid the price, the *high* price, to set us free. And because he has paid for all of our sins, he can **“proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor” (Isaiah 61:2)**. Through faith in Jesus you have the Lord’s favor. Through faith in Jesus all your sins are forgiven. What a comfort that is! God sent Jesus **“to comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:2)**. At the visitation for a funeral there is usually a receiving line with people who come to comfort the family. If you’ve ever seen that before, imagine a line of people and Jesus is in the line. And Jesus comes up to you to offer you words of comfort. Jesus came **“to comfort all who mourn.”**

There are some sadnesses in life that we think we’re never going to get out of, but Jesus came so that you could exchange your sadness for joy. He came **“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” (61:3)**. You can bring your sadness to Jesus and he will exchange it for joy. He already made the greatest exchange. He took your sins on himself and gave you his own righteousness. It says that the LORD **“arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10)**. All those who mourn over their sins and look to him for forgiveness, Jesus wraps in a robe of his righteousness and perfection. In fact it says that we will be called **“oaks of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:3)**. Oaks are a symbol of strength and longevity.<sup>3</sup> Right now it seems like our sadness will never end. But in the grand scheme of eternity our sadness is like a mist and you’re an oak.

In verses 10 and 11 the believer responds to the LORD, **“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God” (Isaiah 61:11)**. We thought our sorrow would last forever, but because of the LORD, actually our joy will last forever. For a brief time now it might not seem that way. But God gives us an analogy to show us that our sorrow really is going to turn to joy. He says, **“For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seed to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations” (61:11)**. One commentator points out that when you plant seed in the ground you might have to wait for a while but you know that it’s going to sprout.<sup>4</sup> Advent is about waiting. Joy will spring up. And it will be a joy that will never end. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, *Old Testament Sermon Studies Series B* from Northwestern Publishing House, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this insight to the sermon study in *Old Testament Sermon Studies Series B*.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this insight to John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 575.