

Words of Hope for the New Year from Isaiah

Introduction

What power does the spoken word have when it relates to our personal lives?

Can we think of words spoken by others and received by us that have affected us?

Where can we find words of hope to guide and encourage us in the coming year?

The aim of this message is to point us towards the Word of God that has the power to transform our thinking and our lives day by day, giving priority to truth and hope.

We may not be able to keep our New Year's resolutions, but when we put our trust in God He gives us the strength to endure and promises to pick us up and set us on the right path when we fall.

Why focus on the book of Isaiah?

It contains familiar passages that are used for readings and are set to music for the Christmas season – It is a mixture of realism and hope, containing references to past times of difficulty and prophetic words for the future – I can testify personally to promises it contains that have been lived out in my own life and the lives of people I care about, and the underlining and notes in my Bible are there as a reminder to me.

Jesus, Word of God Incarnate

It is said that whatever question is asked in Sunday school the answer is Jesus, and it is with Jesus that we start today, even though we are looking at the words written by an Old Testament prophet. Paul's words to the Colossian Christians show us the way:

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through Him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. (2 Cor 1:20)

The prophetic words of Isaiah about the coming of Christ are read and sung in celebration of the Christmas season throughout the country in services of Nine Lessons and Carols and in performances of Handel's "Messiah". So we begin with Isaiah's familiar words that point towards Jesus, light of the world, the one through whom all God's promises are fulfilled:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned..... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace; of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. (Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7)

The traditional carol service continues the story with a reading from the first chapter of John's Gospel which introduces Jesus as the living word or expression of God on earth:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

God's written word is timeless, all-powerful and beyond our understanding, as Isaiah says:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever.....

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts..... (My word) will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Is 40, 55

Colin & I chose Isaiah 55, from which those words are taken, to be read by Peter Warner at our wedding in 1984, and through all the years that have passed since then the strong guiding principle of trust in the word of God remains, whatever difficulties may lie ahead. Paul's advice to the Colossians points to the place the word of God should have in our everyday Christian lives:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col 3:16-17)

So my recommendation to us all as a fellowship is first of all to be active in seeking to listen to the word that God is speaking to us personally and then to share it with those around us:

The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. (Is 50:4-5)

God's promise is to bless us as we gain confidence in sharing the good news of the gospel:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Is 54:7)

This was my prayer as I left Sevenoaks for Maidstone before later moving on to Canterbury.

Words of peace and restoration

If we want to inherit any of the promises of God that we are looking at today, it is important to remember that an act of will is required to trust in God's power and to believe or do what He asks of us. One example of this is our common desire to receive peace of heart and mind. The verse from Isaiah 26:3 was given as a New Year's message at the church I attended as a student when I first became a Christian, and it has remained with me ever since:

You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.

Paul offers similar advice to the Philippians to come through anxiety into a place of peace:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4: 6-7)

Sometimes when we do not hear a word or see the way forward we simply need to stop what we are doing and find a place of rest where we can seek the Lord and wait patiently for the still, small voice:

"In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." Is 35

If we are worried about having another try at rebuilding our lives after messing things up the first time around, we need to remember that God is in the business of restoration and is always there when we call upon Him to help us:

..... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated..... (Is 61: 3-4)

Words of encouragement and direction

Are there times when we feel unsure of God's presence and direction? His word says that we can know that He was there for us from the beginning and will never forget us:

This is what the Lord says – he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you..... See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. (Is 44:2, 49:16)

He promises to strengthen us when we feel weary and to rescue those who are weak and vulnerable when they call upon Him:

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak..... Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint..... (Is 40:29,31)

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. Is 42:3

When we are afraid, we can turn to our Creator and Redeemer God who loves us and wants to lead us every step of the way:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you..... When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned..... Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you." (Is 43:1,2,4)

Promises of creativity and growth

The words of hope already quoted will help us to respond in faith to the difficult situations which may be experienced by ourselves and our friends and family in the coming months, but we can also expect the Holy Spirit to be at work in new ways in our fellowship, releasing creative gifts which will bring great blessing and rejoicing.

There was one evening in Oasis Church recently when we were asked to bring a verse from the Bible to share. A common theme of fertility and new growth emerged from the verses we shared, one of which was the one I brought from Isaiah:

The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame; you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. (Isaiah 58:11)

That encourages us to believe that a time is coming when blessings will flow freely:

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys; I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. (Is 41:18)

It could also be a time of growth when our church building is used to its full potential:

"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your curtains wide, do not hold back." Is 54:2

Our role is to surrender ourselves to the Father's will and see how He will mould and use us:

Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. (Is 64:8)

We can also have faith that some of these promises of blessing will extend to our families:

"They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them." (Is 65:23)

This is certainly our prayer for our family in the months ahead.

Conclusion

I conclude my tour of Isaiah with some words of joyful celebration:

The ransomed of the Lord will return, they will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads, gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Is 51:11)

The days are coming when the glory of the Lord will be revealed in His people:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.” (Is 60:1-2)

Another confirmation of God’s word for the present time came at a recent Elders’ meeting when Pastor David brought a word from Isaiah 43 that I had just been reading myself:

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland..... to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” (Is 43:19,21)

So let us hold in our minds the words of the Westminster Catechism of 1647: “Man’s chief aim is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever” as we discover God’s new path for us in 2013.

I am aware that I have taken some of these words from Isaiah out of context and applied them to personal situations for which they were not originally intended, but the beauty of the Word of God is that it is universal and remains true in many different times and circumstances. My aim has been to inspire us all to search the Word diligently so that we may find and share God’s will for us at this time as individuals and as a fellowship. The New Year is a good time for us to join together in a week of prayer for the coming year at St Andrew’s, and I hope that many of us will be encouraged to come along whenever we are free or to pray at home and contribute in that way.

Val Cannon

30th December, 2012