

Isaiah 61:4-7

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[0 : 00] Do you ever ponder on the big questions? Who am I? Why do I exist? What's the point?

Is there a point? And if there is a point, how can I discover what it is? These are some of the big questions that can occupy our minds.

One of the big blessings of being a believer, of being a Christian, a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ, is to enjoy a high calling, a clear purpose in life, and to know what that purpose is.

The Bible, in different ways and from different angles, often speaks of and identifies what our purpose in life is as children of God, as sons and daughters of God, as disciples of Jesus Christ. It tells us, it identifies for us why we exist and what is the point. In Isaiah chapter 61 and at the end of verse 3, we're given one stirring description of our purpose, of why we exist and breathe and occupy our we spot in the cosmos.

[1 : 41] We exist as believers. So, the passage tells us, for the display of His splendor.

Notice there, at the end of verse 3, the final sentence of verse 3, where the people of God are described in these terms, they will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, and then we have this expression that speaks of our purpose, of why we exist, for the display of His splendor, for the display of God's splendor.

We exist, to use maybe the more familiar expression in the Bible, and perhaps more familiarly or more often used, we exist for the glory of God.

Well, I have to say, I think the language that we find here in Isaiah of displaying God's splendor is even more evocative than the language of living to the glory of God, though both, of course, are true and intimately connected.

This language of us living to display God's splendor takes us a given that God is a splendid, magnificent, beautiful God.

[3 : 10] And what we are called to do as His sons and daughters is, in a small way, to display His likeness. To display something of the Father's likeness as sons and daughters, as members of the family.

We are to display, we are to reveal, we are to publicize in and through our lives something of the splendor of God. That is why we exist.

That is why God continues to give us a measure of health and strength and breath that we breathe, that we might, in our lives, above all every other purpose that we might have, perhaps legitimate in and of itself, but over and above every other secondary purpose.

Our principal purpose is to display His splendor. And I want us this morning to explore this description of our purpose, what it means, what it looks like.

It's evocative language, it's stirring language, but what does it actually mean? What does it look like in our ordinary day-to-day lives?

[4 : 18] How do we display God's splendor? How can we display God's splendor? And I think we can answer that question, at least in a measure, as we consider the verses that immediately follow in this chapter.

So, I'm thinking about verses 4 to 7. And so, really what I'm contending is that at the end of verse 3, we're told this is our purpose, to display the splendor of God. And then in the verses that follow, we're given tangible ways in which we can do that.

Ways that God has determined will serve that purpose of displaying His own splendor. Now, just to recap, because our memories are fragile, and perhaps for any of you who weren't able to be here last Sunday morning, let me just quickly recap that last week we noticed how Jesus, in the synagogue in Nazareth, identified Himself as the Anointed One spoken of at the beginning of this chapter.

There in the synagogue, He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read out the first three verses of this chapter, and then what did He say? Very dramatically, today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your presence.

And so, Jesus said, see that Anointed One that the prophet speaks of? That's me. I am the promised Messiah. I am the Anointed One.

[5 : 46] I am the one who proclaims good news to the poor. I am the one who binds up the brokenhearted and everything else that is said of the Messiah in this chapter.

And we saw how at the beginning of the chapter, we have described how Jesus, the Messiah, is sent and commissioned and anointed by the Father.

We then saw how in the verses that follow, His mission is described. And then we notice how at the end of verse 3, His purpose is also presented, that purpose particularly, of gathering a people to Himself.

A people healed, liberated, and planted by Jesus. And all that Jesus has done and continues to do in our favor is to equip us, that people, to empower us to live lives to the glory or for the display of His splendor.

We live and move and have our being for this grand purpose. And this is a high calling.

[7 : 06] It's a dignifying calling. It is an unparalleled calling. But how do we fulfill this high calling? How do we as God's people display His splendor?

Well, the following verses, I think, answer that question. The following verses describe what this people, healed, liberated, planted by Jesus, will be and do and enjoy.

Notice what is said about us in the verses that follow, verses 4. What are we to do? In what way will we display a splendor? Well, they will rebuild.

They will restore. They will renew. They will be called priests of the Lord. They will receive. They will rejoice. And I'm just glancing through the verses that follow.

In all of these ways, we are given the means, the manner in which we can do that which we are called to do, which is to display His splendor.

[8 : 07] Before we look at the different elements of our calling and mission, let's just clarify the when and the who. So, first of all, the when. Isaiah, as he writes these words, is looking forward to a day when all that he describes will take place.

You know, everything he says is in the future tense. They will rebuild the ancient ruins. They will renew the ruined cities and so on and so forth. He's looking ahead to something that has not yet occurred in his day.

And he's saying at some point in the future, this will happen. Now, obviously, we're standing in a different place. We're standing in our present, the 25th of November, 2018. But standing where we are, we can say that the fulfillment of these promises have, from our perspective, a past fulfillment, a present fulfillment, and a future fulfillment.

Let me just explain what I mean by that. Well, first of all, the words of Isaiah were partially fulfilled in the past with the return of the exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

And we know that Isaiah writes at that time of Israel's history as there is this expectation of an exile and a return from exile.

[9 : 30] And the language that he uses, especially in verse 4, is language that would very much have echoed with exiles awaiting liberation. And they would have read these words with great excitement.

They will rebuild the ancient ruins, restore the places long devastated, and so on. And of course, the day came when the exiles did return from Babylon. And they did rebuild Jerusalem.

Not in the measure and with the splendor that it had enjoyed before. But nonetheless, there was a reconstruction project that they participated in.

And we thought quite a lot about this not so long ago as we studied our way through the book of Ezra. So, the words of Isaiah have already been fulfilled in a measure in the return of the Jews from exile.

But the words of Isaiah are not by any means exhausted by that fulfillment. The words are fulfilled with the birth and mission of Jesus and the birth and growth of the church of Jesus Christ from the first century and into the present.

[10 : 45] And so today, as we constitute the church of Jesus Christ, we are engaged in this mission. And so this mission is one that is being fulfilled in the present, in our day and generation.

But the words of Isaiah will also enjoy a future fulfillment when Jesus returns and inaugurates the new heavens and the new earth. Indeed, even the language that Isaiah employs points into the future.

He speaks in verse 7 of that everlasting joy that God's people will enjoy. And even the language of everlasting joy casts our glance into the future.

So, when we just clarify the when of these promises, then we can speak of them being fulfilled in a measure in the past, of them being fulfilled today, and of them being fulfilled in the future.

Our concern this morning is with the present, with how these words are fulfilled in our lives and in our experience. And that's what we'll focus on.

[11:56] So, that's the when, but what about the who? Who are they in verse 4? They will rebuild the ancient ruins, and it goes on, and you often have that language. They will do this, and they will do that, and they will receive, and they will rejoice.

Well, who are they? Well, they are God's people. Those healed, liberated, planted by Messiah Jesus. And I think that's clear enough.

In what we've already said, we've been operating on that assumption. But I think there is one important detail that I just want to stress. The they that the prophet speaks of, or we, we do what we do together with the Messiah.

Verses 4 to 7 speak of the continuing ministry of the Messiah, but carried out in and with and through his people.

So, when we read the beginning of the chapter, the description of the mission of Messiah is, in a measure, very much what he does. By himself, you might say.

[13:00] But as the chapter continues, his mission continues, but now his mission is conducted together with us. So, as he gathers a people to himself, as he gathers people from east and north and south and west, and as he builds his church, then his mission continues, but in and through his people.

And that's what we find described in the verses that we are looking at this morning. Well, let's get our teeth into verses 4 to 7. And remember, we're looking at what is said about the mission of God's people as a means of answering our question.

How are we to display God's splendor? Well, let me suggest different ways in which we are to do that. And I'll mention what they are as we make our way through these verses, and then just think about each of them in turn.

We are to display God's splendor by the work of restoration and renewal that we are tasked with. Then in verse 4, we are to display God's splendor by the community that we belong to and cultivate. And we'll see that in verse 5, though if you just read verse 5 now, it might not be immediately obvious. We are to display God's splendor by the name that we are called by and the service that we render as priests of the Lord, as ministers of our God.

[14:26] We are to display God's splendor by the wealth that we enjoy. And we are to display God's splendor by the joy that we possess, this everlasting joy that is spoken of at the end of verse 7.

Now, as we go through each of these ways, by necessity, what we're going to do is a big picture sweep of these great means of displaying the splendor of God.

But that said, though it will be a big sweep, I hope we can ground what we say in real life applications for each of us and for all of us together here in Aberdeen today.

So, the first way in which we are to display, or the first means by which we can display God's splendor, is by the work of restoration and renewal that we are tasked with.

Notice there verse 4. Let's read it again. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated. They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

[15:32] Now, all of the verbs that we've noted there in that verse, they're all applied in this verse to physical reconstruction, rebuilding ruins, restoring devastated places, renewing ruined cities.

And as we mentioned a moment ago, you can see how the exiles in Babylon would have applied this promise to their mission of rebuilding Jerusalem. And yet it's clear that the mission goes beyond Jerusalem and beyond physical reconstruction.

I think what we can see in this verse is how this verse paints for us, I think two things. It paints for us both a stark reality and a startling hope.

So, we're thinking of how we display the splendor of God by this work of restoration and renewal. We see that in this verse, and in this verse I'm suggesting we see these two realities, these two elements, a stark reality and a startling hope.

What is the stark reality? Well, it's simply this, that we live in a broken world. We live in a desolate world.

[16:45] We live in a devastated world. The picture that is painted here in verse 4 is of complete and abject desolation, of cities long abandoned, of cities completely destroyed.

You know, this isn't a situation that requires a little bit of refurbishment. The picture is a stark one of destruction, of desolation, of a world that is broken in pieces.

This is the stark reality that is being presented. I don't think I need to persuade you that this is so, that this is an accurate description of the world we live in.

Just look around and see for yourself. Look around, perhaps without having to look very far.

Perhaps in your own life, your own relationships, your own family, the society you are part of, the world that we live in is a broken world.

That is what we see. That is what the evidence demonstrates for us. And this broken world is populated by broken people.

[17:58] In fact, it's broken people who have, in great measure, created this broken world. We are all, in a measure, sometimes in a big measure, broken, devastated, desolate.

Why so? Why is that so? Well, the Bible identifies our sin and rebellion as the root cause of our brokenness. And the gospel, the good news, in the person and work of Jesus, deals with that root cause.

You know, as we get to grips with this reality, this stark reality of a broken world inhabited by broken people, it is necessary to, with realism, acknowledge how stark is the picture painted by the prophet.

You know, the language he uses is as strong as he could possibly conjure. He speaks of these ancient ruins, long devastated, for generations.

It's almost as if we are being called to get real and accept that the damage done is so deep and so longstanding that it is, by any reasonable measure, beyond repair.

[19:17] You know, it's as if, you know, a contractor had been brought to, you know, have a tour through these devastated cities and, you know, somebody would say, well, you know, what's the deal about reconstructing all this?

And he would say, well, just forget about it. You know, don't even try. This is beyond repair. You can't reconstruct this. It's just way too far gone. It's just that bad, the situation.

When we apply this to broken lives, to our broken lives, and the broken lives of those we live with and around, it can get just a bit depressing.

We are broken beyond repair, so it would seem. And yet this verse that presents a stark reality also, alongside it, presents a startling hope, because that's the whole tenor of the verse.

The focus isn't principally on the extent of the destruction, but rather on the rebuilding that is to be done. They will rebuild the ancient ruins.

[20:23] And people say, no, it's impossible. And God says, but it will be done. They will rebuild the ancient ruins. They will restore the places long devastated. They will renew the ruined cities. It is possible.

It will be done. They will rebuild. They will restore. They will renew. And we, as God's people, we are called to rebuild, to restore, to renew.

It's a big ask, and it's a big task. But empowered by God, this is what we can and will do. This is your calling to build, to restore, to renew.

This is how you will display the splendor of God. So the question for us is this. Are we living out our calling in your own life?

Are you building or destroying in the life of others as you interact with and relate to others? Do you build up or do you destroy? In your family, do you build up or do you destroy?

[21:25] In your workplace, do you build up? Do you renew? Or do you destroy? We can maybe ponder on that and examine ourselves as we look back, even on the week that has passed.

How have we occupied ourselves as God's people? Our calling is to build. It's to renew. It's to restore. Not to destroy. Not to belittle. Not to humiliate.

Not to knock people down, but to build others up. And of course, that's true, not principally for each of us as individuals, although that is true, but for us as a people of God, as a church, as a community of God's people that rebuilds and restores and renews.

And maybe we look around this broken world. We think about the stark reality and we say, but the task is too great. It's too difficult. It's impossible. Just as I was thinking about this passage, I saw a news item on the BBC website.

It wasn't a big headline news item. It was more one of these kind of general interest stories. It was just on Friday that I saw it. I think it was just on Friday that it came up on the website.

[22 : 38] And it was about the restoration of a 1,300-year-old gold helmet of an Anglo-Saxon king. And some of you may recognize the story.

Some of you may not. But you may remember just a few years ago, it was in 2009, an enthusiast who had his metal detector discovered a hoard of Anglo-Saxon treasure.

And it was such a significant discovery, it came to be known as the Staffordshire hoard. And it was valued at over three million pounds. All these remains, these remnants of Anglo-Saxon jewelry and what have you that was discovered by this guy.

And of the 4,000 pieces that were dug up, about a third were the remnants of an Anglo-Saxon helmet or crown.

We call it a crown. Some call it a crown. Some call it a helmet. Apparently, in those days, those who have studied these things tell us that only the king wore a helmet. All the rest, well, they just had to go into battle unprotected.

[23 : 46] But the king had his helmet or his crown that he wore. And archaeologists, of course, have taken all of these remnants. That would be about 1,500 of them. And they've sought to piece them together to reconstruct the helmet or reconstruct the crown.

Now, can you imagine that task? And the news item was that they had succeeded in the task. And yet, impressive though the work of reconstruction seemed to be, certainly as I saw the headline and imagined what had happened, not all was as it seemed.

You see, what the archaeologists have done, and when you think about the circumstances, what more could they have done? What they've done is that they've taken these remnants, and with the information that the remnants provide, as they've tried to put together this jigsaw puzzle, really, they have recreated, I presume, on a computer screen, what the helmet or crown must have looked like. And then what they've done is crafted a new crown. So when I read the report, I thought they'd got all these 1,500 pieces, and they'd stuck them all together, and they'd created this helmet.

Then I saw the picture of the helmet, and I thought, well, that looks a pretty good helmet for something that's been put together by remnants. But then, of course, that's not what they did. That was impossible. It was impossible to restore that crown.

[25 : 10] Impossible. They did the best they could, which was work out more or less what it looked like, and make a new one. Now, think of that helmet, smashed into smithereens over millennia, thousands of pieces, and indeed many of the pieces missing.

Think of that crown as a picture of our world, and indeed of our lives, so often smashed to smithereens, broken into a thousand pieces.

Impossible to reconstruct and restore to its pristine condition. And yet that is what we are called to do as God's people, to rebuild, to restore, to renew, and hand in hand with God, empowered by God, accompanied by God, in His power.

We don't just produce a replica, but we restore the original crown. This is how we are to display His splendor.

We have been gathered together. We have been healed. We have been restored. We have been implanted for this purpose, for the display of His splendor. How do we do it? Well, we do it by living this life that we have been called to live, to renew, to restore, to rebuild.

[26 : 30] But we also are to display His splendor by the community that we belong to and cultivate. Notice in verse 5. Verse 5 we read, Aliens will shepherd your flocks, foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.

Now, what has this verse got to do with community? I wonder how the Jews in Isaiah's day understood what was being promised. You might imagine some of them in Babylon as captives there and very conscious of their enemies, impeding their freedom.

And then they read this and they think, wow, what an amazing thing. The day is going to come when all these Gentile nations, all these enemies, the Babylonians and the Assyrians and the Egyptians, they'll be our slaves and they'll work the fields and we'll sit under the olive tree and enjoy all of their work.

Well, that's a wonderful picture. I wonder if some of them understood it in those terms. But if they did, they were wrong.

The picture being painted here by the prophet in verse 5 is not the picture of a slave state, but of joyful cooperation. It's a picture of those who were formerly aliens, formerly enemies, formerly foreigners, taking their place among God's people.

[27 : 57] Aliens will shepherd your flocks. Yes, those who were your enemies, the Egyptians and the Babylonians and the Assyrians. But now they will join with you and together with you they will shepherd your flocks.

The foreigners together with you will work your fields and vineyards. Those who had been apart, those who had been enemies, those who had hated each other's guts will be brought together and work together as one people, as one community of God.

That is the picture that the prophet is a painting. In the Messianic kingdom, all will work together. Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor.

This is the community that we are called to belong to, but also to construct and cultivate. We are to welcome all and integrate all and commune with all.

And it is such a community that will display his splendor. And what did outsiders say of the believers in the early church? See how they love one another.

[29 : 09] And you see, when people said that, they said that because something of God's splendor had been displayed and they could see it. See how they love one another. See how they serve one another.

See how they share with one another. See how they work together. And when those outside look and see these things, God's splendor is being displayed.

And here, of course, you see how it's impossible to do this alone. You can't display God's splendor in isolation. We need to display his splendor as we live together in community and serve one another.

But how are those who were aliens and strangers? How are they to become part of the family of God? And after all, these words describe us.

You know, we are those who were aliens and strangers. We are the Gentiles. How are we to become part of this family and so work together with God's people?

[30 : 11] Well, we become part of this family by faith in Jesus Christ. As John tells us in the first chapter of his gospel, to those who believed in him, who believed in Jesus, they were given the right to be called sons and daughters of God.

And so we display his splendor by the work of renewal and restoration that we are called to, by the community that we belong to and cultivate, but also by the name that we are called by and the service that we render.

Notice in verse 6, we move on through to the next verse. Verse 6, what does it say? And you will be called priests of the Lord. You will be named ministers of our God.

The prophet looks forward to a day when all God's people will be called priests of the Lord. And of course, that day has come in fulfillment of what we read in Exodus chapter 19 and verse 6.

Let's just quickly notice what we read there. So in Exodus chapter 19 and in verse 6, we read as follows. You will be for me, God is speaking to his people, and he says, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[31 : 35] He's looking forward to a day when all those who made up God's people would be a kingdom of priests. And of course, as that was anticipated by the words of God there in Exodus, as Isaiah picks up on that promise and reiterates it in the chapter that we're looking at.

So that reality is then described as a fulfilled reality by the apostle Peter. In 1 Peter chapter 2 and in verse 9, what do we read?

1 Peter chapter 2 and in verse 9, we read, and Peter here is speaking to those who have already experienced this reality. He says of God's people then, you are, not you will be, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The name that we are called by, priests of the Lord, ministers of our God. And as we serve as priests of the Lord, as we live as a holy nation, we display the splendor of God.

The service that we render as priests of God is described by Paul at the beginning of Romans chapter 12. And I'm sure many of you are familiar with what he says there, where he describes that the sacrifice that we offer as priests is the sacrifice of our very lives.

[33 : 13] Our very lives are the sacrifice that we offer in joyful worship to God. And as we so live, so we display the splendor of God.

If we refuse to offer this sacrifice, if we are miserly in our service, then we will fail to display the splendor of God. If instead of living as a holy nation, we flirt with sin and live as we please, then we will fail to display the splendor of God.

But this is how God has ordered that we might display a splendor, by the name that we are called and by the service that we render. But then moving on, and briefly just noting the last couple of things, we also can display a splendor by the wealth that we enjoy.

Again in verse 6, just the second half of verse 6, we read, you will feed on the wealth of nations and in their riches you will boast. I wonder if any of you are thinking, well, I like this one.

I like displaying God's splendor by the wealth that we enjoy. I can buy into this one. Well, what is Isaiah anticipating when he speaks in these terms?

[34 : 23] Well, Isaiah is looking forward to the day when the nations of the world or the citizens of the nations of the world will embrace the Messiah and be welcomed into God's family.

He's not anticipating some military victory by the armies of Israel conquering Babylon and Assyria and Egypt and who knows what other kingdoms.

That's not what he's anticipating. What he's anticipating is members of these nations of the world embracing the Messiah, coming to Jerusalem, becoming part of Zion.

That's what he's anticipating. And they will come with all their wealth. And they will enrich the family of God by their coming.

And of course, that is the reality. The church of Jesus Christ throughout its existence has been ever enriched by the nations forming part of it.

[35 : 23] The church of Jesus Christ, even at a local level of a congregation, we are enriched as the nations of the world come and take their place with us. And as they bring with them their gifts and talent and their diversity and their material resources, all brought to the altar of God to be used to His glory and for the display of His splendor.

We are the aliens and foreigners who, by God's grace, have been welcomed into the family of God. And we all, in our own small way, have enriched that family by our presence.

Isaiah goes on to speak of an inheritance and double portion that God's people will enjoy. And without spending time thinking much about that, I think he's painting the picture of God's banqueting table, heavy laden with all manner of spiritual and material delights that we will enjoy, that we do enjoy in the here and now, and that we will enjoy in even greater measure in the new heavens and the new earth.

So we display God's splendor as we enjoy God's generosity and as we share of His generosity with others. But then finally, we display God's splendor by the joy that we possess.

There at the end of verse 7, Isaiah closes with this statement, and everlasting joy will be theirs. He's already spoken of rejoicing in our inheritance, but he closes with this jewel in the crown in terms of the expression itself.

[37 : 05] Everlasting joy will be theirs. You know, what is this everlasting joy? Perhaps we need to picture this joy in terms of length and depth.

You know, the word everlasting highlights, I suppose, in the very construction of the word, it highlights the aspect of length. It is never-ending in duration.

It is everlasting joy. So we can see the length of it, if you wish. But I think we also need to think of this term in the sense of its depth.

There is a quality or depth to this joy that is our inheritance. To use biblical language that we find both in the Old and the New Testament, it is the joy of the Lord.

It is joy that the Lord gives us, but it is also beautifully and mystically, I suppose, the Lord's joy that we share. You know, Jesus spoke of that, of His joy being in us.

[38 : 08] This joy that is of a quality that can be described as eternal joy, everlasting joy. And we display God's splendor as we rejoice in the Lord and live strengthened by the joy of Jesus in us.

And so I come back to where I began with that question, why do we exist? Why do you exist? Well, if you are a Christian, if you are trusting in Jesus as your Savior, if you have come to Him and sought from and received from Him forgiveness of sins and welcome into God's family, then this is why you exist, to display His splendor.

And so I charge you to go into the world and shine, displaying His splendor. Indeed, it's something we need to do together.

Let us go into the world. Let us exist in the world, displaying His splendor as we renew and restore, as we live in community, as we serve, as we enjoy of God's goodness, and as we rejoice in God. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that ours is indeed a high calling, a noble purpose. We thank You for that great blessing that is ours in the midst of so many blessings that we enjoy, that we have been healed, we have been rescued, we have been liberated, we have been planted for this great purpose.

[39 : 55] We are oaks of righteousness, and we are those who, as those planted by God, are to display Your splendor.

We acknowledge and we confess that we fall very far short in that calling that we have received. And so we pray that You would help us. We pray that You would help us as we have reflected on Your Word, to reflect on our own lives and see how in these different ways we might better display Your splendor.

And help us so to do, we pray. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. ■. Amen. Amen. ■■■■