

Signs that Point Toward Grace 2025  
 Isaiah 61:1-4, 11 Luke 4:14-22

### Isaiah 61:1-4, 11 (New Revised Standard Version)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

### Luke 4:14-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

It was almost 40 years ago, on Tuesday morning, January 28, 1986,  
 that I happened to be in a room where the TV was on, and was watching  
 when the space shuttle Challenger blew up shortly after lift-off.  
 It was terrible, shocking and totally unexpected.

A commission was formed that held hearings for several months  
**to explore what happened and try to explain why,**  
**so that such a thing would never happen again.**

When things go wrong, most companies, organizations and institutions  
 will try to figure out why and how things went badly or wrong,  
 and consider changes in policy and procedures  
 that might prevent it from ever happening again.

When the nation of Israel was defeated & crushed by the Babylonians,

it created a terrible theological crisis for the Jewish people.

They had understood themselves to be the chosen people of God,  
the powerful Creator and Sovereign Lord over all that is,  
**so how could such a thing happen to God's favorites?**

Confronted with that crisis to their faith and understanding,  
the religious leaders and teachers tried to figure out,  
what they could do or change so that  
such a thing would never happen again.

The religious authorities, that is the scribes and Pharisees,  
decided that God had abandoned them to defeat and exile  
because they had not obeyed and followed  
their religious rules and rituals well enough,  
and because they had allowed outsiders and impure sinners  
to corrupt and tempt, to influence and draw them away  
from strict and careful adherence to religious law.

And as unpleasant, difficult & crushing as that experience was,  
perhaps the worst part **was knowing**  
that despite centuries of warnings through the prophets,  
the hammer had finally come down hard as the consequence  
for idolatry, injustice and rejecting the ways of God ...  
... **knowing** as a nation and people, that **we did this to ourselves.**

That led to a change in the religious practices of Judaism,  
toward a much greater focus on external rules and rituals,  
and avoidance of any contact with sinners and outcasts.  
**But the religious authorities were missing the point.**

God had never demanded human perfection or more rules and rituals.  
The Lord had consistently demonstrated gracious love and mercy,  
and for righteous justice in response to God's blessings...  
... **simply to respond to God's love with love toward God and neighbor.**

**When the passage we read from Isaiah was written,  
the people of Israel were suffering through the Babylonian exile.**

Writing to that broken, struggling and disappointed people,  
this passage offers a wonderful promise of hope and restoration,  
that Israel would return to rebuild their homes and nation,  
and that it was all grace – entirely a gift from God.

**It was all God, not something they earned or deserved for good deeds.**  
God's grace always comes first, and only then we are able to respond.  
These were words of hope and reassurance from the Lord God  
who would graciously bless and liberate the people of God.

**The God of Scripture is a God of grace, goodness and relationships,  
with mercy and compassion for our human struggles and failings.**

Listen for the hope and promise being proclaimed, vs. 1-2.

**The spirit of the Lord God is upon me**, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor**, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

and the day of vengeance of our God, is truly a fascinating phrase that almost seems out of place in this text of encouragement.

That phrase *vengeance of our God* refers to the justice of the Lord against those who oppress and exploit the poor and powerless.

Continuing with God's proclamation through Isaiah, vs. 3, 11

They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, **to display his glory**. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise **to spring up before all the nations**.

Simply put, **God would act graciously and generously toward Israel, and in turn they were to reveal and reflect that grace to the world, as a sign of hope, as a light revealing God's gracious glory.**

The text of Isaiah 61 is really a remarkable description of the hope and joy of God's ongoing truth and promises...  
... and what it means for Jesus to be a part of and Lord of our lives.

The author of Luke is very intentional in letting the reader know, that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, Luke 4:1-2, 14

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. ...  
then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, ...

... all of which point's directly toward Isaiah's declaration, vs. 1

**The spirit of the Lord God is upon me**, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, ...

Then, as Luke informs us, vs. 16-19

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day ... He stood up to read ... and found the place where it was written: **"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me**, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

His emphasis taken from Isaiah, **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor**,  
or as Jesus will explain in John 3:17,

Indeed, God did **not** send the Son into the world **to condemn the world**, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This passage, that comes very early in Luke's Gospel, it's intended to announce **who Jesus is** and **what God sent him to accomplish**, as had been promised through the Old Testament prophets...

... which led to his self-identifying declaration of vs. 20-21

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**

So how had the Isaiah scripture been fulfilled that day?

**It was fulfilled by Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit and sent to accomplish the gracious purpose of the Lord,** for that's what happened in the course of his mission and ministry, the blind **see**, the unworthy **cleansed**, the broken **leap for joy**.

Isaiah's words closely match the recorded life and ministry of Jesus, as led by the Spirit to proclaim the Good News of God's Kingdom, giving sight to the blind, the lame made to walk and leap, the lepers and sick were healed and dead restored to life, while eating and welcoming sinners and outcasts.

Isaiah's message was a call to the nation of Israel, but the nation **did not fulfill** that call from God.

In contrast, Jesus was faithful & did fulfill God's purpose and call, not with vengeance, but with healing, with grace, peace and love.

Jesus proclaimed the Good News of God's Kingdom, **where it's all grace, and God does all the heavy lifting by reaching down to us, unworthy sinners and outcasts to all of us who can't seem to get it right on our own...**

**... a God doesn't wait for us to improve or get it right before calling us and drawing us into his gracious love,** hitting the reset option, erasing the data of our sin & failures.

Many years ago, I used a little computer, called a Palm Pilot, that had a little hole, where I could stick a paper clip; which would reset the whole thing, back to how it first came out from the factory...  
... and I think God's grace as something like that...

...that God embraces us in our brokenness, our failures & weakness in order to restore us, release us and set us free so that it may go well with us, walking with the Lord...

... so that now, having received God's grace, we can let it naturally spill out and over into the world ...  
... and so, we become signs revealing God's love, signs of grace – healing and hope for others.

If we consider, what was the life, ministry and message of Jesus,  
it was most definitely not, try harder and do better at religion.

The religious authorities who opposed Jesus and his mission of grace  
taught about an angry God of justice & vengeance, always demanding  
that we've got to try harder and do better or face the consequences.

But the Good News that Jesus proclaims  
is not about self-help, nor a self-improvement program ----

rather it's all grace, our God who seeks the lost and discouraged,  
who races out to greet and welcome the prodigal son,  
who eats with sinners, outcasts and failures,  
and promises eternal life to a thief while dying on a cross.

Jesus tells about a **God doesn't wait for us to improve or get it right,  
but before all that he calls us & draws us into his gracious love.**

**The message from Jesus is whatever our sin, our failure or disaster,  
God's gracious love is always way bigger and far more magnificent.**

Therefore, the faithful and fruitful and fulfilling Christian life  
is really about learning to live toward God's grace and blessings  
& learning to trust God's love to mold & gradually reshape us,  
**toward the unique and beloved we were created to become...**

**...so that God's grace overflows, splashing & spilling out onto others,  
and so that we become blessings and hope to our world much in need.**

As Christians, the Holy Spirit is present & resides in each one of us,  
to live out and proclaim the Good News of God's grace and favor,  
as plantings of the Lord **called to blossom with God's glory...**

... just as Jesus explained in **Matthew 5:16**,

**In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and  
give glory to your Father in heaven.**

Yes, we strive to be faithful and effective disciples who serve,  
but there is a huge difference between trying to be religious,  
and walking in faithful response with the God who loves us.

Our call and our challenge  
is that as those whose lives have been touched by Jesus,  
for us to be the encouraging and joyful people of grace and hope,  
**to live as signs by inviting other people, everyone we can,  
to the same hope, healing & wholeness that we've received.**

But I think that sometimes we may work too hard at being religious,  
at trying to earn or deserve God's favor,  
thereby driving ourselves crazy and frantic ---

as if somehow, it depends on us more than God's love.

But **God's grace** goes against the pressures we're under in this world,  
so, no wonder we lose focus, feel insecure and uncomfortable with it.

No wonder we struggle to fully accept and fully trust  
the unlimited and unfathomable strength of God's love.

**Instead of focusing on the free gift of God's grace through Jesus,  
we become preoccupied with trying to live a Christian life,  
to follow religiously our rituals and holy traditions...  
... and so, our focus shifts away from enjoying God and God's grace.**

Our call is not about trying to placate God's angry wrath & judgment,  
but to simply to live within the amazing wonder of God's grace,  
to accept & respond by seeking to know & walk with our God,  
in a growing and living relationship of loving trust,  
and be like road signs pointing the way toward Christ.

As the beloved, cherished and called disciples of Jesus Christ,

The spirit of the Lord God is upon **us**, because the Lord has anointed **us**; he has sent **us** to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners; **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**

**You will be called** oaks of righteousness, and be the planting of the Lord, to display his glory... so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.