Joy for the Nations

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[0:00] Good morning, church. It's good to see you all this morning. Would you turn with me to Isaiah chapter 41 and verse 21. That is page 563 in the Pew Bible. Isaiah chapter 41, verse 21, page 563.

Now, what we're talking about this morning is ultimately joy. Why is it so hard to find? Where do we get it? Joy. Now, if you're new to the Bible, the chapters are actually the big numbers, and the small numbers are the verses. But it's good to know, as you think about those numbers, that the chapter and verse numbers were actually added later to the text over time to help readers navigate the passages together. But those chapter divisions don't always divide the flow of thought perfectly. So what we'll see in Isaiah is that there are some sections or some ideas that begin in the middle of one chapter and that end in the middle of another. So our chapter divisions aren't always perfectly dividing our sermon units. And that's what's true of our text today. Isaiah is turning his sights to a new topic, and his treatment of that topic doesn't end until chapter 42, verse 17.
So we're going to look today at the end of chapter 41 and how that idea gets developed and brought to its conclusion in chapter 42. And then what we'll find is in the middle of 42, another idea picks up, and that's where we'll start next week. But today, here in 41 and the first half of 42, the topic is joy. How can the nations find lasting joy? That's where Isaiah is headed in this section. And you can see that for yourself if you have the Bible open and you jump ahead and look at chapter 42, verse 11. 42, 11, which is the sort of climax where Isaiah is headed in this section. 42, 11 says, let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits. Let the inhabitants of Selah sing for joy. Let them shout from the tops of the mountains. So Isaiah is looking all around, all around at the nations around him, from the deserts to the mountains, from Kedar, that's an area in the northern Arabian desert to Selah, that's a city in the far south. He sees all around all these nations.
[2:32] What does he see? He sees them erupting with joy, joy for the nations. Isn't that what we want for not just ourselves, but our friends and our kids and our neighbors? Real joy.

Well, Isaiah here is going to give us an analysis of joy. First, why it's so hard to find, and then second, how we can actually get it. So first, let's take a look at why it's so hard to find.
This is where Isaiah starts in chapter 41, verse 21. Now, just a little context for our passage. Remember, up to this point in this section of Isaiah, up to this point in chapter 40 and 41, who has Isaiah been talking to? He's really been talking directly to the people of Israel.
But now he's going to turn out to the broader nations. To the people of Israel, God has been speaking to their felt problem that they're weary in exile, that they're feeling guilty because of their sin. But to the nations, it's not so much that they're feeling weary or guilty, empty, but empty. Empty. Bring out your gods, the Lord is going to say. And let me show you why you feel so empty. Let's pick up in verse 21. All right, verse 21. Let me read this for us.
Set forth your case, says the Lord. Bring your proofs, says the king of Jacob. Let them, that is the nations. Bring them, that is their gods, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome. Or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. Do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing.
[4:35] An abomination, that is, an offense against creation, is he who chooses you. I stirred up one from the north, and he has come from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name. He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay. Who declared it from the beginning that we might know, and beforehand that we might say, he is right. There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I was the first to say to Zion, behold, here they

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are.

And I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news. But when I look, that is when I look among the gods, there's no one. Among these, there's no counselor who, when I ask, gives an answer. Behold, they are all a delusion. Their works are nothing. Their metal images are empty wind.
Okay, so if you're not feeling well, and you go to your doctor, what you want is a diagnosis, right? Why am I feeling this way? What you don't want is a doctor who says, you know, you're actually fine.
Everything's okay. When everything's not okay, right? You need to hear the bad news so that you can get to the root and hopefully find a remedy. And what's happening here in verses 21 through 29 is a diagnosis of what's ailing the nations. And in fact, it plays out like a court case.
The Lord, the God of Israel, is calling together the nations and saying, let's have some proof. Prove to me that your gods are really gods. If they are really gods, then surely they could speak, and surely they could act, right? Verses 22 and 23, God says, they should be able to tell us something. And at the end of verse 23, they should be able to do something, even if it's good or bad, good or harm. So can they speak? Can they act? And more particularly, not just can they speak, but a little more closely, if we look at the text, God is sort of saying, can they look back at all that's come before and make sense of it? Can they give meaning to it? Verse 22, tell us the former things what they are, that we may consider them and we may know their outcome. Can these so-called gods give any sense of meaning to history? And not just that, can they look ahead and tell us where history is headed? Verse 22 picks up, declare to us, not just former things, but the things to come. [7:15] Tell us what's to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. And of course, the idols of the nations come up short. They can't speak and they can't act.

They can't give any kind of meaning to the past or tell us where the future is headed. But with the Lord, the God of Israel, things are completely different. Can this God act?
Yes, verse 25 tells us. Verse 25 says, he's the one who will stir up one from the north. Now, in the historical context, the reference there is to Cyrus, the coming Persian ruler who will defeat the nation of Babylon and liberate the exiled Jews in the sixth century. Okay, this God can act.
Can he speak? Yes. Verses 26 and 27 say that this God foretold it all before it would happen. The Lord predicted Cyrus's conquest right here in the book of Isaiah, hundreds of years before it happened. Part of the power of this section of Isaiah is that God is telling his people over a hundred years before the fact, not just that they're going to go into exile, not just that they're going to be brought back, which practically never happened in the ancient world, but he also tells them how he's going to do it. Now, many skeptical scholars will treat these predictions in Isaiah, they'll sort of look at these predictions in Isaiah and say, hey, look, this is just proof that these chapters were written after the fact. In other words, they say, you know, they'll say that some later anonymous writer in the sixth century must have seen these things happen, Cyrus and the downfall of Babylon, and then he must have written them down and then added them to Isaiah's old book.
And of course, if that's true, if that's where these texts really come from, then these parts of Isaiah don't really have much power, do they? In that case, the Lord isn't so much different than the so-called gods of the nations. But the question is, should we jump to such a quick conclusion? [9:25] Should we rule out the possibility of predictive prophecy altogether? Is it simply impossible that God could have foretold these things? How do we figure that out? How do we decide?

Well, you know, the fact of the matter is, is that we don't have any evidence of some anonymous sixth century pseudo-Isaiah who saw these things and wrote them down and attached them to the book of Isaiah. We don't really have any evidence of that. But we do have evidence that the God of the Bible can predict the future and make good on those predictions. Well, where do we have that evidence?
Well, you know, in this very book of Isaiah, we will see God speak not just about Cyrus, who will liberate the people from their political exile, but Isaiah is also going to talk about a servant who will come after that, who will atone for the people. And other Old Testament prophets will speak of a king who is supposed to come from David's line and who will come from Bethlehem and who will first appear in northern Galilee and who will appeal not just to the Jews but to the Gentiles as well. And this one to come will be pierced and wounded for his people's transgressions.
You see, hundreds of years before the fact, the God of the Bible predicted that Jesus, the Christ, would come. And God has made good on all of those promises. So if we follow the evidence, where does it lead? Which view has the best evidence? That there was an anonymous writer in the sixth

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century who could have wrote things down and then attach them to Isaiah? Do we have any evidence for that? Not really. But we have a lot of evidence that the God who created all things and who is the Lord of history can make promises and fulfill them.
So for following the evidence, we find that maybe it's not so hard to believe that God, through Isaiah, can predict the coming of one like Cyrus who will liberate his people.
[11:35] But of course, the problem with the nations is that they don't know this God. They serve gods that aren't really gods at all. In fact, at best, they're just personifications of the created world. That's why verse 24 says to these so-called gods, look at verse 24, he says, Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing. An abomination, that is an offense against a created order, is he who chooses you. You know, to take, to take some aspect of the created world and hold it up as a God, right, to take a good thing and make it an ultimate thing, which is what idolatry is. Isaiah says that's an offense against creation itself. Created things aren't meant to be worshipped that way. And what is the outcome when we do? We'll look at verse 29.

Behold, they're all a delusion. Their works are nothing. Their metal images are empty wind. Emptiness is the outcome. Now, it's easy, of course, to look at the ancient world and think how foolish they were to worship idols, right? How empty all of that was.
But you know, the human heart always worships something. It's impossible for our hearts to not have some ultimate concern, some driving deep love, something that we elevate to ultimate in our lives.
We always worship something. And that something will either be a created thing or the creator. There's really no third way.
So whereas today our gods, you know, we don't call our gods by names like Marduk, like they did in the ancient world, or Zeus in ancient Greece, or Odin, you know, like the old Norse gods. Even though we don't give our gods those names, right, we're still worshipers.
[13:35] And our so-called gods leave us just as empty and just as without joy. What are some of the gods we might worship today? Well, think of the god of success.

It's easy to worship success, isn't it? After all, who doesn't want to be successful? To be liked, to be known, to be influential. And so, in chasing success, in worshiping it, we study hard, we work hard, we make the right social connections, we climb the ladder, we pay our dues, we take our risks. And you know what the outcome is? Some people actually make it. But then what? It's emptiness. The irony is, if you worship success, you never feel like you've truly made it.
It's always emptiness in the end. Now, of course, success, right? That's a pretty, that's a pretty base god, isn't it? Everybody knows you shouldn't worship success, duh. After all, we think it's relationships, right? It's love that really matters. We don't want to build our lives around success. We want to build our lives around relationships, around finding a partner, or starting a family. So maybe if I just get the right spouse, or the right kids, or I find the right community, then I'll make it, then I'll be okay.
But again, the irony is, if you worship family, if you worship relationships, it'll tear your relationships apart and leave you empty. Besides, no spouse, right? No family, no community could ever meet those expectations.
[15:27] If you're looking to another person to make you ultimately happy and ultimately okay, that person should run the other way, right?

And look around. You know, most of us who move from partner to partner to partner or community to community to community searching for it, we're not happy. We're empty.
We think we're so much more evolved than the ancient world. But are we? You know, in the ancient world, they had gods of power and family and love.
They had names for them, but that's what they were. We worship the same things. We just use different names. But though the names have changed, the result is the same.
We're empty too. Why is joy so hard to find? Because taking a good thing and making it into an ultimate thing leads to emptiness.
[16:49] But what does the Lord do about it? Does the Lord, the God of Israel, the one true God, just leave us, the nations, in our emptiness? He could, you know.

He could say, that's what you've chosen. You can have what you choose. And He could continue to let us worship created things. And He could let us just continue to reap the empty wind.

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What does God do about it? What hope is there for the nations? What hope is there for us, for you and me? And that brings us to the next part of our text.
You know, you notice in verse 42, or excuse me, in verse 24, in verse 24 of chapter 41, God says, Behold, the false gods are nothing. And then in verse 29, He says, Behold, they're all a delusion. But then chapter 42 opens, and God says, Behold, again. Behold. But this time, Behold my servant. [17:54] Behold the remedy to your emptiness. Behold the one who brings real joy. Let's pick up and read chapter 42, verses 1 through 9. Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud, or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.
A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his law.
Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk in it. I am the Lord. I have called you, and you there refers to the servant in verse 1. I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and keep you, and I will give you, this servant, I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison, those who sit in darkness.
[19:19] I am the Lord. That is my name. My glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things now I declare before they spring forth.

I tell you of them. So the bridge, the bridge between the emptiness at the end of chapter 41 and the joy that we looked at at the very beginning, the joy for all nations in chapter 41, verse 11, the bridge is right here in verses 1 through 9.
This is how God does it. This is how God can take you and me from emptiness to joy. But notice, God has to do it. You know, it's easy to think, well, if my problem is idolatry, if I'm worshiping the wrong things, then I'll just start worshiping the right things.
And on the surface, that sounds obviously right, right? Stop doing this, start doing that, and you're good. But the problem is, that way of thinking underestimates how deep our problem really is.
We can't actually save ourselves that way. Our hearts are like little idol factories, and they just keep churning them out.
[20:45] And if we turn from one, we'll fall into another. And if we try to worship the true God, we constantly fall away. You see, what we need is more than just a little bit of knowledge and a little push in the right direction.

What we actually need is to be liberated. In verse 7, God says, I didn't come to give you a little knowledge and a little push in the right direction.
I've come to set you free, to open the eyes that are blind, and to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. You can't make this right, God says.
I have to make it right. You can't simply wake up one day and say, you know, I'm going to promise to follow God today. I'm going to make a covenant to stop worshiping the wrong things and start worshiping the right things.
God says, how long will you keep that promise of yours, that covenant of yours? No, God says, I have to be the one who makes the covenant. I've got to make the promise.
[21:43] I have to seal the relationship. There's no other way. You can't make things right. I have to make things right. And how does God do it?

Look at verse 1. Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations.
Justice. To a world where everything has gotten mixed up and gone wrong, this servant of the Lord will come, Isaiah says, and put things right.
He will bring forth justice. Justice, a writing of what's wrong. You can't make it right, but he can. Three times the word justice is used here in these first four verses.
And the word justice in Isaiah means not just God's declaration of what's right and true, but God's restoration of what's right and true. Justice in the Bible is sort of like the opposite of chaos.

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[22:52] You know, you remember chapter 41, it ends, speaking of empty wind, right? That's where chapter 41 ends, empty wind. And the Hebrew word there, one of the Hebrew word there is actually tohu, which is a word that sort of means what it sounds, tohu.

It's the same word used in the opening verses of Genesis to describe the unformed creation, formless and void. It's just tohu.
It's as if Isaiah is saying, look, idolatry returns us to the nothingness and emptiness of God's creation. But God's justice is the right ordering of life.
When the Creator speaks in Genesis 1, what happens? The formless takes form and the emptiness teems with life. This is justice in the Bible, the right ordering of life.
If idolatry sinks us into chaos, the servant comes and at last brings justice, the healing, restoring order of the Creator.
[24:08] And He's doing this not just to Israel, but to the nations in verse 1. He's going to bring forth justice to the nations, to all of us. And is He only going to do it halfway?

No, He's going to carry it through faithfully, verse 3 says. And He's not going to stop until it's established, verse 4 says. Through the agency of this servant, the Lord is going to put right what we could never put right.
Into the sea of our idolatry and emptiness, the servant comes to restore and repair and ultimately to put us right with God.
That's what the Lord says of this servant in verse 6. If you look again at verse 6, He says, I will take you by the hand and keep you, and I will give you as a covenant for the people.
In other words, in and through this servant, the nations, the nations who didn't know God, who were far from God, without God, and without hope in the world, trapped in the emptiness of idolatry, in and through this servant, those nations would be sealed in a right relationship with the one true God, held by Him in a covenant, in a binding promise.
[25:28] And when you look at the Old Testament, the heart, the very heartbeat of the covenant, of God's covenant in the Old Testament can be summed up in this phrase, a phrase that God says to His people over and over again, what is the covenant?

It's this. God says, I will be your God, and you will be my people. That binding, intimate, sealed relationship with God.
In and through this servant, the nations who are far off will be brought near. Though they had spent themselves in the service of false gods and reaped the wind of emptiness, God says, through my servant, I'll be your God, and you'll be my people.
That's the justice He will bring. That's the covenant He will make, and that will bring joy. But who is this servant? Who's the one who can bring us from emptiness to joy through the justice that He brings?
Who's the one who can liberate us from the prison of false gods and seal us in a covenant with the one true God? Well, Isaiah doesn't tell us here.
[26:42] He just says He's coming. One day, He'll come. And when He comes, He's going to be really different than what you might have expected.

When He comes, He's not going to be brash and loud and self-promoting like the rulers of this world. Look at verse 2. He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice in the street, lift up His voice or make it heard in the street, right?
He's not going to parade around making a big show brash and loud and self-promoting. Rather, He will be gentle and He will be good.
A bruised reed He will not break and a faintly burning wick He will not quench. And you know, hundreds of years later, after Isaiah wrote these words, when Jesus Christ arrived in Galilee, preaching and healing and announcing God's kingdom, it all came true.
Here was the one who had the power to cast out demons, but the gentleness to meet the most troubled and burdened sinner, the most afflicted and weary soul and take them into His hands and give them peace.
[28:05] How true Isaiah's words really were when we look at Jesus, a bruised reed He will not break and a faintly burning wick He will not quench.

Friend, how empty do you feel this morning? Do you feel bruised and weak? You know what a reed is, right?

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A reed is like a long piece of grass down by the water, you know, these sort of long, slender things that grow. And they're really tender, right?
And they're really easily snapped and broken and bruised. Is that you today? Or do you feel like, do you feel like your light is about to go out, right?
That's a faintly burning wick, right? You know, if you have a candle in your house and it's burning and then you blow it out, right? And then there's a little ember right there just sort of faintly, faintly burning and smoking, smoldering, just barely glowing.
[29:12] Is that you today? Do you feel like your light is about to go out? Friends, then listen to the message of Isaiah.

listen to the words of God for you. That Jesus Christ, the servant of the Lord, has come for you. You might feel useless like a battered and bruised reed, but you're not useless to Him.
And you might feel like you've gone too far, you've strayed too far, like your wick is about to go out, but you're not too far gone for Him. None are too weak or too far gone for the Lord Jesus.
Though you might grow faint or be discouraged, as Isaiah says in verse 4, He will not grow faint or be discouraged till He has established justice in the earth.
Read the stories of the Gospels, friends. Jesus faced every trial. He actually was bruised and broken. He was quenched.
[30:28] He descended into the godless chaos of the crucifixion when everyone around Him was worshiping a false God and put the one true God in their midst to death. He descended into that godless chaos.

Why? To bring justice to the nations. So that you can be put right. So that God's justice might be established for you so that your sins can be put off and so that His righteousness can be put on.
He went down into sorrow so that you can know joy. Real joy. The joy of knowing God. And you know, friends, if this was true of Jesus, then it must also be true of those of us who follow Him.
The ministry of Jesus was one of strength exercised in gentleness and in restoration. Bruised reeds were handled with care.
Faintly burning wicks were nursed back to flame. Jesus came as a servant. So as you come to trust Him, know that He will hold you tenderly in His hands.
[31:43] And as we seek to follow Him, let that be true for us as well. Let us be servants. And may we find that His joy becomes complete in us.

Let's pray together. Our Father in Heaven, as we take a minute and just pause in the quiet of this moment to be before You, our Creator, and to take deep breaths of air that You have provided and to just sense our bodies that You have given to us.
God, help us to see our need for a Savior. Help us to see the ways in which the false gods that we worship under whatever name we give them have left us empty.
But help us to see now, Father, the substance and the justice and the joy of Jesus, our Savior. by Your Holy Spirit, allow our hearts to reach out to Him in faith and in grasping Him to know that we are taken hold of by You.
We pray this in His name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
[33:20] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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