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**Sunday 22 January to Sunday 29 January 2023**

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Sunday 22 January 2023

# Can I be healed?

by Pastor Greg Fowler

**Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matthew 4:23).**

Read Matthew 4:12–23

Often I am asked whether Jesus heals miraculously today as he did when he was on earth. Usually, it is someone who is suffering from a chronic illness or fighting a debilitating disease, and they desperately seek relief from their Lord. While I would never presume to know God’s thoughts and actions in every circumstance, I do know his character, and I am encouraged by Scripture.

When Jesus began his ministry, healing was an integral part of the message. Time and again, we see Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God has arrived, in his very person, that those who hear the news are called to repentance, and almost always, there is miraculous healing. This is the loving nature of our God. He calls us away from those things that lead away from life and calls us to the ultimate source of life. Jesus’ ministry was all about bringing life and tending to the wounds of a broken world. He asks us to follow him as members of his kingdom.

I know that Jesus’ nature doesn’t change. Where there is a simple and clear proclamation of the kingdom of God and repentance, there is also healing. There has to be. Whether it is the healing received as we take the body and blood of Christ in communion or the healing received when we lay hands on the sick and pray, the gospel heals. Sometimes we witness a miracle that’s obvious. Sometimes the healing is not obvious.

**Lord Jesus, heal us as we turn to you and your kingdom. Amen.**

*Pastor Greg lives in Adelaide and serves as pastor of Golden Grove Lutheran Church and Golden Grove Lutheran Primary School. He is blessed to spend lots of time with his grandchildren, Teddy and Olivia. His spare time is taken up with golf, Formula 1 and going out with his beautiful wife.*

 Monday 23 January 2023

# God on our side

by Pastor Greg Fowler

**The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard**

**(Isaiah 52:12b).**

Read Isaiah 52:1–12

Over the past few years, we have heard much about being protected. COVID-19 meant we took precautions to guard against infection: wearing masks, sanitising, social distancing and getting vaccinated. It was prudent to have protection when facing danger and the unknown. As a good Father, God pledges his protection to us as we travel the different roads of life where we are challenged with the unknown.

God’s leading and protection are described as ‘going before’ his people in the Old Testament. I love this image of God making a way for us so we can see more clearly, and hazards are removed. In the movie, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, a jungle cutter cuts swathes through the forest to create a safe passage to traverse the land. Sometimes, we wish God would do that for us. We wish he would mow down all of our obstacles and kill those things that threaten us. While God does go before us, he does not destroy just so our passage is easy.

Jesus came to be Immanuel, that is, God with us. When Jesus goes ahead of us, it is as a guide and counsellor rather than a hatchet man. Jesus is much more likely to speak to us about the troubles a particular course of action will create rather than endorse our will and tear down others so that we can succeed. God going before us is not a licence for us to do as we please, thinking that God will ‘make a way’. God’s protection and guidance are experienced when we submit to him and seek his lead. He will comfort us when we fall and alert us to danger. He will be our defender against attacks from the evil one. He will love us so we can walk his way in grace.

***Lord God, as we walk through life, may you show us your will. May you guide our steps and go before us. Amen.***

Tuesday 24 January 2023

# Bearing suffering

by Pastor Greg Fowler

**Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering (Isaiah 53:4a).**

Read Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

We are used to hearing this reading on Good Friday, so it appears out of place in January. This reading is one of several ‘servant songs’ in Isaiah, in which the central character is seen as the Lord’s servant who does the will of God so that others may have justice, redemption and freedom. While it is entirely correct to see Jesus’ passion as a fulfilment of this prophecy, it was initially spoken to the people of God in exile, bringing hope and meaning to their suffering.

Suffering befalls us all, and there is no simple explanation for why God allows us to experience loss and pain. Many books have been written to help believers to understand and bear suffering. Here in this servant song, we see one of the most rich and grace-filled descriptions of suffering. Engaging with the text allows God’s Spirit to be at work in our own suffering.

These words were written to the exiles in Babylon who were suffering, initially because of their unfaithfulness to God. Their breaking of the covenant led to their captivity. But Isaiah then shows God’s people that they suffer not for punishment but for redemption. Through their suffering, others will receive life from God. Our God is restoring his people to their place as bringers of blessing and reconciliation for the whole world. In their suffering, in their wounds, others were healed. This theme will be developed more fully in the life of Jesus.

We never suffer alone. Just as the exiles had God with them, transforming discipline into redemption, God is with us in our suffering, transforming us and drawing us closer. Through his Spirit, God will bring meaning and blessing from our wounds.

***Lord Jesus, be with us in our suffering. Give us the wisdom to see you at work and at peace with your presence. Amen.***

Wednesday 25 January 2023

# New love

by Pastor Greg Fowler

**For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back (Isaiah 54:7).**

Read Isaiah 54:1–17

In 1970, Joni Mitchell released the song *Big Yellow Taxi*, which included the cliché ‘you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone’. Everyone has experienced profound loss after something we have taken for granted is removed from our life. It could be a graduation, where the school that felt like such a pain then seems now like a place of growth and love. It could be a relationship where a continued focus on a few annoying things blinded one party to the deep love and joy of the partnership.

When God’s people were taken to Babylon, they thought God had abandoned them. The truth, of course, was that they abandoned God a long time before, and the exile was the natural consequence of rejecting Yahweh. Judah had become unloving toward God and didn’t see the blessing that came from the covenant. It was in this exile that God’s people clearly saw what they had lost. They had time to ‘think about what they had done’, so to speak, and they wanted to be reunited with God.

In response, we see our God’s incredible love on display. Not only did God return them to Judah, but he blessed them so much that they needed to enlarge the places of their tents to accommodate everything that the Lord would give them. If only they had remained faithful in the first place, they could have avoided the horror of exile. God blessed them with new love.

Do we take our relationship with God for granted? How long has it been since we took the time to number his blessings in our life? When was the last time we told another person how much God means to us? Let’s not empty our relationship with God of its joy and power. In praise and thanksgiving, we acknowledge our special place in his heart.

***Lord God, thank you for your faithfulness to us. As we see your actions in our lives, may we give thanks and praise for your great love. Amen.***

Thursday 26 January 2023

# Being purposeful

by Pastor Greg Fowler

**[My word] will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:11).**

Read Isaiah 55:1–13

Having purpose in our lives is critical for our wellbeing and sense of fulfilment. Without it, our actions can be just one thing after another, trying to fill a need or ‘be happy’ in that moment. That lack of connectedness in our life can create anxiety and stop-start motivation. Conversely, when we have a God-given purpose, we live in his peace, grow through our successes and failures, and enjoy a deep sense of peace.

To be purposeful in life does not mean we have to want to be the prime minister. True purpose comes from God – through his word. God sends his word to all of us, and we are most fulfilled when we allow that word to be the driving force in our life. We are encouraged to seek out spiritual gifts and grow them in our daily life. When we spend time in God’s word identifying how he has gifted us and devote time to developing that gift for his service, we experience purpose and peace in remarkable ways. Many years ago, there were church programs that methodically worked through an inventory to discover gifts. While useful, we do not need to undertake a program. God speaks to us through his word and prayer, and we naturally desire the gifts God has for us.

Purpose starts and ends with God’s word. I live out his purpose by using his gifts in the places he calls me. I let the results look after themselves. God’s ‘results’ are always richer than anything I could have imagined, so I live in blessing and peace, confident that God’s word will accomplish his purpose through me.

***Lord God, settle my anxiety and show me your purpose. Enlighten me with your gifts and allow me to serve you. May your peace always be in my heart. Amen.***

Friday 27 January 2023

# No exclusion

 by Pastor Greg Fowler

**And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him … these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer (Isaiah 56:6a,7a).**

Read Isaiah 56:1–8

Some time back, I was ministering to a young man who loved the Lord but had a terrible drug dependence. With help from others in the congregation, we helped him get work, reunite with family and gave him spiritual support. The problem was he was often high on drugs when with us. I was worried about what all our ‘good families’ would think of a drug addict in church, so I told him he wasn’t allowed to come to worship when he was high. The next Sunday, the young man saw me at the church door, desperate to worship. As he was high, I told him no – after all, he could be a danger, and our strategic plan was to have families in our church, not druggies. All he said to me was, ‘would Jesus turn me away?’. I was convicted of my sin there and then, and he sat with my family during the service.

We Christians can be a judgemental lot. We need to be ever vigilant to avoid excluding others. We can have the best reasons in our own mind for not wanting to welcome someone, but could that be a factor in our unconscious bias? We can find Scripture to back up our ‘godly rejection’. We can even appear loving by offering conditional acceptance – as long as the person jumps through some hoops. Isaiah reminded God’s people that the temple was meant for all people, and his people had a special calling to include, bless and encourage those from all walks of life.

Here in Australia in 2023, we have new challenges of inclusivity in the church. How do we speak the gospel to our current society? Do we preach that Jesus is the new covenant, and that we welcome all who make that confession and strive to build a relationship with him? We cannot look to disengage with society and live a parallel existence. God said he would bring them to his holy mountain. I pray we welcome them.

***Lord God, as you called all nations to worship you in Jerusalem and instructed your people to welcome them, may we welcome those who seek you today. Amen.***

Saturday 28 January 2023

# What do you mean, ‘my truth’?

by Pastor Greg Fowler

 **Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart (Psalm 15:1,2).**

Read Psalm 15

For the past five years, the phrase ‘speaking my truth’ has been gaining momentum. Initially, it confused me. After all, there can only be one truth. Right? We can have differences of opinion, but truth is steadfast.

Speaking ‘my truth’ comes from the experiences of those less powerful or exploited in society. The old adage ‘the victors write the history’, and, therefore, the rules and decide the truth, means that the experiences of the losers are deemed untrue. If the experience of someone exploited (economically, socially, sexually) runs counter to the prevailing ‘truth’ of the powerful, then that experience can be seen as untrue. We are now trying to include the voices of those who have been pushed to the side in our culture by allowing for ‘your truth’ and ‘my truth’.

The psalmist encourages all to live in God’s tent and bring with them their truth. We build each other up by speaking from the heart about how God has sanctified our experiences – even those at the hands of the powerful and exploitative. Our truth does not deny that Jesus is ‘the way, the truth and the life’. The eternal truth of the Word made flesh reveals a new truth of the human experience as he seeks out the broken and powerless. ‘Blessed are the meek’ is Jesus’ truth. He gives his voice to those who have been silenced for years. May we learn with humility to listen to ‘your truth’ as we live under Jesus as Lord.

***Lord Jesus, give us compassion, understanding and love to hear the voices of those who cry to you. Amen.***

Sunday 29 January 2023

# It’s not easy being blessed

by Kathy Matuschka

**Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them (Matthew 5:1,2).**

Read Matthew 5:1–12

Have you spent time with a Rubik’s Cube? You can so easily make a movement that moves one side of the cube closer to your goal while messing up some clever work you did on another side. Sometimes that’s how it feels to follow Jesus: it’s hard to know when to act and when to stop acting, when to accept and trust that God will sort it, and when to challenge the status quo.

When I read today’s ‘blesseds’, I feel that following them all can be puzzling. It seems that some of these are things we can work towards, like being a peacemaker. Some are things that happen to us whether we like it or not, like mourning. And others can be a bit of both, like when taking a stand for the gospel leads to persecution.

Some of the outcomes we can expect as we follow Jesus seem to be cases of cause and effect (do this and then this will happen), while others are reversals – or paradoxes – in relation to how the world usually works.

When I hear the Beatitudes, I wonder: ‘Is there a single key I can use to unlock these?’ In looking for a key, I’m after:

* something that will help me feel less uncomfortable about Jesus’ words (like when he says we are blessed to be meek!)
* something that will give me confidence that the decisions I make throughout each day give glory to Jesus, my teacher.

But as much as I (and perhaps also you) would like to homogenise Jesus’ teachings, they simply don’t let us. We live in that intersection between Jesus’ first and second comings, the ‘now’ and the ‘not-yet’, and these times are not for the faint-hearted. That’s why Karoline Lewis said (on the Working Preacher website): preachers should not preach about the Sermon on the Mount but let it preach itself. Therefore, I invite you to sit with the text and notice which of Jesus’ teaching niggles you today and which parts comfort you.

***Dear Jesus, thank you that you began to teach your disciples while you were on earth and that you continue to teach us in many ways today. May your comforting and challenging words speak to my heart today through your Holy Spirit. Amen.***

*For most of her life, Kathy Matuschka has preferred to give witness to her Christian faith using her ears and her hands. As a person for whom writing has not come easily, she now delights in learning to share her gospel hope using words as well. Kathy serves within the LCA Queensland District as Assistant Director for Ministry & Mission.*