

# The People of God

## *Christmas Gifts:*

Isaiah 61:1-7  
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Have you ever received worthless advice? A patient holds his side gingerly and says: “Doctor, Doctor, I broke my ribs in six places.” The doctor puts his hands to the man’s side six times and asks, “Does it hurt here, does it hurt there?” Each time the patients winces and exclaims, “Ouch, yes!” The doctor retreats to his chair. After a moment, he looks the patient in the eyes and says: “Six places you say, I know what you need to do. Don’t go back to those places.” I’m sure that joke surfaced because of people unsatisfying experiences.

People from all over the world come to Rochester in hope because of the famed Mayo Clinic. Many are helped; but many are frustrated. They seek unconventional therapies here and there, try products from infomercials, consult self-help books or take foreign trips for pseudo or experimental treatments. They wander here or there looking for help.

*Turn to Mark 6:34 (page 766 in pew Bible).* Jesus observed this same thing with the people of God, people who were in covenant with God. They wandered here and there looking for help. When Jesus tried to retreat with his disciples to a deserted place for rest, he was spotted. People ran ahead of him, bringing their sick and hurting. The crowd eventually swelled to 5,000 men plus many women and children. In Mark 6:34, we read:

***When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. (Mark 6:34, NIV)***

Although many of us have put our faith in Jesus Christ and we participate in the new covenant with him, could we behave like sheep without a shepherd? Do we run here and there looking for help? Do we try this and that to address the deficits or challenges in our lives? Perhaps, you and I are ignoring the great Christmas gift we've been given.

It is no accident that God chose shepherds to be the first to hear of and see the Savior. It is no accident that they would be the first human beings to witness to the Savior. It is no accident that their individual identities are hidden, that all we know is their collective identity as shepherds. Brothers and sisters, the people of God are no longer without a shepherd. The people of God have been given a shepherd so that they will stop wandering. They have been given a shepherd so that they will stop wandering, lost from their source of provision, lost from their source of protection, lost from their source of healing, lost from their source of wisdom, lost from their source of meaning, purpose, love and life. Do you believe that Jesus is your 21<sup>st</sup> Century shepherd? Do you believe that he is your daily shepherd? Do you have fellowship with his Spirit? How quickly do we turn from him and look elsewhere?

*Turn with me to Isaiah 11:2 (page 544).* I'm concerned that we as his church and we as individuals stray from Jesus. I think we can easily be misled. We look at others, and if they look good to us, we assume that they do what we need to do. So if we men see a tool or gadget that seems to do the job, we want it. If we church leaders see a congregation flourishing in some way, we want to do the same thing, assuming that the power and payoff is in what they do, not in what God is doing. When we behave this way, we act like sheep without a shepherd. But consider the Christmas gift we have been given in Jesus. About the Christ, Isaiah prophesied:

***The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord... (Isaiah 11:2, NIV)***

The promised Messiah has wisdom and understanding from God. He also has God's ability to counsel people so that they can gain wisdom and understanding. He also has the Spirit of power, so that he performs the mighty works of God among us. Doesn't that sound like God is coming among us through a human being to shepherd his people? So how do we unwrap this Christmas gift of a Shepherd/Messiah and benefit from it daily?

*Turn with me to Isaiah 61 (page 574).* When Jesus returned to his home village, his home synagogue and his family, his heart must have ached for his loved ones to receive the gift others tasted. These home folk were in his heart and he chose to read this text from Isaiah and tell them it was fulfilled in their hearing.

***The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for 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 provide for those who grieve in Zion — 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 be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.*** (Isaiah 61:1-3, NIV)

Notice that Christ Jesus was anointed with God's Spirit to proclaim and act. He was anointed to proclaim good news to the poor and then to bind up the brokenhearted. He was anointed to proclaim freedom, release, the time of God's favor and justice, and then to comfort, provide, give to those sitting in ashes a crown of beauty, to those mourning the oil of gladness, to those in despair a garment of praise. The people of God wandering about, seeking help here and there, often frightened, will now be known as oaks of righteousness, majestic trees where people come for shelter, a work of the Lord that displays his splendor. This is God's Christmas gift to you and me. We've been given a shepherd to talk to us so that we make decisions, not based on our

circumstances but on this time of God's favor. We've been given a shepherd who acts for us, binding up our hearts, comforting us and equipping us for celebration. With a crown of beauty, we celebrate. With the oil of gladness, we celebrate. With a garment of praise, we celebrate; and we grow like lights in the darkness.

If we are not hearing this good news, then we are not listening to the shepherd. If we are not experiencing a change in heart and an increase in faith and joy, then we are not following the shepherd. Indeed, there is even more about what we are becoming with the shepherd. Turn to the 4<sup>th</sup> verse of Isaiah 61:

***They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.*** (Isaiah 61:4, NIV)

The people of God working together, because of their relationship with the Messiah and because of his work among them, will rebuild and renew what has long been lost. God is not looking for a people who follow conventional wisdom. He is looking for a people who will listen and follow the shepherd and together tackle the impossible. That is the Christmas gift we have received in Jesus. What long ago has been lost in judgment, we are to regain in faith. Not through some clever program, but through our relationship with the shepherd, the lives we've lost can be regained, the families we have lost can be rebuilt, and the church, community, nation and even the ancient ruins can all be renewed.

It is very clear that the Spirit of the Messiah, the Spirit of Christ has been resisted and grieved by our unbelief and pursuit of help elsewhere. Every one of us has done that individually and we have all done that corporately. Our call is clear: to act in repentance as we are convicted and to act in faith as we are taught. What sins are you being convicted of? It is time to confess and leave them. What is he calling you to do? It is time to act.