

Beautiful Feet

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- [0 : 0 0] Come with me, if you would, in the Bibles to page 613, which is not the message that you were going to get today, but nevertheless it's a message from God's Word.
- Just one verse, in fact half a verse is my text today. Isaiah 52, verse 7. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news.
- I want to speak today about beautiful feet. Yesterday I was waiting for a meeting, and it was a little bit early, and I popped into an art gallery that I passed to look at some of the paintings that caught my eye in the shop window.
- And when I walked in, they were playing in the background, Handel's Messiah. And I thought to myself, ah, that's the first time I've heard it this Christmas season. I'll hear it many more times before Christmas.
- I love listening to it. Actually, just the other day I downloaded from the internet a copy of the full libretto, the words of Handel's Messiah, in sequence, unbroken.
- [1 : 0 3] And just reading through them was such a blessing, because of course they're just the words of Scripture, taken beginning with the prophets and showing the story of the promised Messiah and the fulfillment in his coming in the New Testament.
- And one of my favorite arias in the Messiah, well, they're all favorites really, but one of them that I love is the little aria just on this verse. Actually, it's on the quotation of this verse from Paul in Romans chapter 10.
- You know it. How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, that bring glad tidings of good things. When you think about it, it does seem a little bit odd, doesn't it, to be preaching and singing about beautiful feet.
- I don't normally think about feet as being a very beautiful thing. My feet aren't beautiful. I've got hammered toes. They're all squidged up. And they're not very attractive. I can tell you my days as a doctor, I've examined plenty pretty ugly feet in my time.
- So what on earth is the prophet talking about here? Beautiful feet on the mountains. Of course, it's imagery, isn't it? It's poetic. It's not the feet, really, that he's interested in, of course, but it's what the feet are bringing.
- [2 : 1 4] It's the good news. It's the news that this runner, this messenger, is bringing, that it's just so wonderful that it makes everything about him beautiful, even his feet. I sometimes used to experience that.
- When I did work as a doctor, I remember one time in the coronary care unit when somebody had come in very ill and his family were waiting in the waiting room and I was putting in an emergency pacemaker after he'd had a heart attack.
- I just remember coming out and coming into them, sitting very worried, as you can imagine. And I just said, it's all right, he's going to be okay. And the man's wife just jumped up and put her arms around me and kissed me.
- Suddenly, you see, I had become beautiful to her because of that wonderful good news that I conveyed to her. And that's why this messenger here in Isaiah is beautiful, because the message that he brings is good news.

If you look at the second half of the verse, it's gospel. It's a gospel of peace, of happiness, of salvation, of the rule of the God of Israel. And that's why verse 8 says that the watchmen lift up their voices and sing for joy because they see that this news is coming to them.

[3 : 23] The watchmen are out on the high places beyond the city looking in the distance to see what news there might be, what hope there might be for an embattled people in the city. And they see the coming of a messenger and they know that it must mean good news.

There's a lovely instance of that back in 2 Samuel chapter 18. You can read it later on, don't look it up. But David and his men are waiting for news of the battle and they see a runner coming and they look and they see he's on his own and they recognize him.

And so he's a good man, he's coming with good news. And that's what they're speaking about here. But what is this good news that Isaiah is speaking about? And why is it so desperately needed?

Why are they longing for it? What is it that these watchmen know that makes them scan the horizon so desperately for good news of peace and of happiness?

Makes them so aware that they need good news. What's the real substance of this good news that they see approaching them? Well, to understand that, we need to have a little look at some of the verses around about this lovely verse.

[4 : 35] And we need to see two things that the watchmen see and that they understand. First of all, the watchmen see the dreadful reality of a society and of a world that has rejected the rule of God its maker.

Look at verses 3 to 5 of Isaiah 52. See, they know, don't they, that they are a captive people. Isaiah's words are addressed to a people who are in captivity in Babylon.

They're written, they've spoken a long time before that captivity actually took place, but they speak so powerfully to that captive people just because Isaiah did predict exactly what was going to happen to them.

And now there are people really at rock bottom. They are absolutely in despair. And then you know that when people are at rock bottom, when they're in despair, so often they look over their whole life, don't they?

And they just see their whole life as having been absolutely worthless. And that's exactly the situation here for Israel. They saw their whole history in the light of their present condition of despair, of captivity, of worthlessness.

[5 : 42] So verse 4 says that long ago they were in Egypt in exactly that position, in slavery. Then lately they've been oppressed by the great Assyrian nation.

And now, verse 5, they were sold on for nothing into captivity in Babylon. Taken away for nothing. Worthless, absolutely, as a people. They were in dust, says verse 2, with their necks in irons, bonds.

They're oppressed, verse 4. Even their rulers, verse 5, are wailing all the time. No wonder they felt absolutely worthless. No wonder they felt like absolutely nothing.

That sense of worthlessness brings terrible, crippling psychological pain, doesn't it? Alas, we see that sometimes, don't we, in individual people who have been beaten down into a sense of their own utter worthlessness because of terrible cruelty or neglect.

that they've suffered. I think of a person I know who's got desperate issues of worthlessness and absolutely rock-bottom self-esteem just because all through her life, growing up, her father utterly abused her in all kinds of ways, mentally.

[6 : 59] Never, ever, once in her whole life, ever said anything of encouragement or praise or anything like that to her. And she's psychologically crippled today. I think of a man I met just the other week in India who grew up as a Dalit, as one of the lowest of the low caste in India, despised and rejected by his village, not even allowed to drink from the same well as everybody else, utterly, utterly made to feel worthless and nothing.

And was wept as he told us the story. But that can also happen to a whole society, to a whole nation. And that was precisely Israel's experience here.

It was an experience of absolute despair and worthlessness. It lost all confidence, all sense of life and of love and of purpose. A total sense of paralysis out of that sheer worthlessness.

Perhaps that's not so very far removed from so many of the marks of real pain and paralysis. Such a sense of worthlessness that does abound so pervasively in parts of our societies today.

And that's why it's important to see what is the root cause of this dreadful societal pain that these watchmen see. Isaiah is very clear.

[8 : 22] Behind it all is a very real burden of something much, much more concrete and much more objective than just a subjective feeling of worthlessness.

Behind it all is the very real guilt of people who have been condemned by God himself. It's God's anger, it's God's wrath against the rebellion and the rejection of his loving rule that ultimately explains their plight.

Look at chapter 51, verse 17. Wake up, says the Lord, to the people of Israel and to the whole world, in fact. Wake up to the reality that all of your psychological problems and all of your pain have got a far deeper root.

They have a spiritual root. It's a huge spiritual problem. Verse 17. You have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath.

That's why you're staggering in despair and pain, he says. That's why your society is tottering and adrift. It's the rebuke of God, verse 20. They are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God.

[9 : 36] Now, that's a pretty unpalatable sort of thing for our modern ear to hear, isn't it? The wrath of God at the root of all this problem. But actually, don't assume that ever it was a very palatable thing for people to hear.

It certainly wasn't. Nobody has ever liked hearing that the root of all their problems is their own sin and their condemnation by God for it. That's why every one of the prophets was persecuted. That's why the Lord Jesus himself was despised and rejected and ultimately crucified because his message was just the same.

Repent, he said. Save yourselves from the wrath to come. That's why all the prophets were the same. No one's ever liked that message and yet it is the absolute consistent message of the whole of the Bible that all our human strife, all our human angst and pain, all our broken relationships, every one of our sorrows, all of it ultimately is as a result of God's just and right and totally justified anger at the outright rebellion that human beings have exhibited against his rule, against our maker.

Even Israel as God's chosen people who had absolutely no excuse whatsoever for her sin. But also the whole world. That's what Paul says in Romans chapter 3.

The whole world, Jew and Gentile alike, are held accountable to God. And that is the real heart of the cancer, the root of our human societies.

[11 : 12] That's what manifests in all of these different ways in our psyches, in our social problems, in everything else and in our fears. We are well, aren't we, living so much in fear?

Verse 13 of chapter 51 is right, isn't it? We fear all the day. We fear about the economy.

We fear about the future. We fear and worry about our families, about our jobs. We worry about the ozone layer. We fear what's happening to the polar ice caps. We fear about swine flu, about our cholesterol levels, about cancer, and a whole host of all kinds of other fears.

We fear all the day. Why is that? Well, verse 13 tells us because we've forgotten the Lord, our maker.

It's very ironic, isn't it? The prophet tells us that we fear because we have forgotten God who made all things. And he said, we fear men, verse 12, who die, who are just like grass.

[12 : 23] We reject the gracious rule of a loving maker, but we willingly enslave ourselves to the tyranny of things which are merely material, natural. We're enslaved by mere things.

Doesn't that describe the human condition? You see, that's what the watchman sees. That's what the Christian believer sees too. We see the dreadful reality of a society and a world that has rejected the rule of God, its maker.

We see the consequences, we see that all of that is caused, but also we see with the watchman the root cause that underlying every other problem in this world, be it its ecosystem that's broken, be it the economy that's broken, be it our relationships and marriages and families that are broken.

Behind all of these lies the great problem, the problem of God's wrath, his condemnation, because of our rebellion and our inexcusable sin.

And that's what the watchman see. And that's why they're looking for some hope of good news. But the watchman also sees something else.

[13 : 32] As our verse tells us, they see the wonderful revelation of a God who will not reject the world that has rejected him, the world that he's made. They see the beautiful feet of that coming wonderful good news of happiness, of salvation, of the reign of God.

Just look again at these verses that told us all about Israel's fears and condemnation and worthlessness. Chapter 51, verse 12. You're afraid of man who dies, says God, but I am he who comforts you.

It's a great word in the prophet Isaiah, isn't it? That's the words that Handel's Messiah begins with. Chapter 40. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. I, the Lord, he says, who spread out the heavens, who fashioned the earth, I have covered you in the shadow of my hand, verse 16.

I say to Zion, you are my people. See, that's good news to end all fear. Even the great fear of death itself, verse 14. He who is bowed down shall speedily be released.

He shall not die and go down to the pit. That's the fear of death, gone. And, verse 22, look, an end to all condemnation and wrath. The God who pleads the cause of his people says, behold, I have taken from you the cup of staggering, the bowl of my wrath, you shall drink no more.

[14 : 58] No condemnation is what they see in the message for those who are in Christ. And, the end also of that terrible poverty of spirit and despair of worthlessness.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 52. Put on your strength, O Zion. Put on beautiful garments. The beautiful garments of a bride, beloved of God, in the place of a slave.

And sit up. Second half of the verse, verse 2. Be seated, O Jerusalem. Be enthroned, says one version, as a wonderful, regal queen.

You thought you were nothing, says verse 3, sold away for nothing. But God says, you are beyond price. You'll be redeemed without money. By something as the apostle Peter would write hundreds of years later, something much more precious than mere silver and gold.

You see why the watchmen sing for joy? Because they see it coming. Where there is condemnation and God's terrible wrath, they see peace on the lips of the messenger.

- [16 : 05] Where there is paralyzing fear, they see liberating salvation coming with this messenger. And where there is deep pain, where there is dejection and a sense of worthlessness, they see happiness and joy in abundance.

How could that possibly be? How could that wonderful news be coming? Well, look at verse 8, chapter 52. Because they see, because they've been given a wonderful revelation of a God who will not reject the world, but who is returning.

Verse 8, they sing for joy, for eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion. They see the Lord who doesn't reject his people forever, but who returns, verse 9, to comfort that word again and to redeem his people.

And verse 10, to bring his salvation not only to them, but to the very ends of the earth, to all the peoples of this sad world. It's obvious, isn't it, when you read those verses, just reading these verses alone, that Isaiah is talking about something far, far more than just a return of this beleaguered people from Babylon to unearthly Jerusalem.

These later chapters of Isaiah's prophecy talk more and more and more about something far more wonderful. They talk about the recreation of the whole world, the whole universe. They talk about the birth of a whole new creation.

- [17 : 36] That's why verses 11 and 12 here, that's why they talk about preparing for a departure of all of God's people right out of this whole world of defilement. In a great pilgrimage into the holiness and the light of the place where God himself will be the be-all and end-all.

The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. Read on in the chapters of Isaiah later on today when you get home to see what that place will be like. The language is just wonderful.

The place, he says, of everlasting joy, where the oil of joy will replace mourning, where a garment of beauty and a headress of beauty will replace the ashes of death and decay.

And that's what Isaiah's watchmen saw coming way back then. A revelation of the wonderful news of a coming kingdom and a returning king, the return of the Lord himself.

Eye to eye they see the return of the Lord. And those were the joyful tidings that they shared.

- [18 : 46] They sang for joy to the people who were walking in deep darkness. They sang a song of light and of peace and of joy and of hope coming, certainly, for their troubled lives.

That's what those watchmen saw. That's what they said. Well, aren't we like the watchmen? We see, and surely we see even more clearly than they do, don't we, the return of the Lord that we were just singing about.

We've seen it begin, haven't we, in the coming of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem and Nazareth with the wonderful comfort that his very presence brought to all who came within the orbit of his ministry.

A foretaste of blessing for the oppressed, for the humble, for the downtrodden, for the broken. A foretaste of that which will be forever permanent when he comes again. We've seen that in history and we've seen his coming made absolutely certain in the triumph of his cross, in the redemption that was accomplished, not with money, as Peter says, but with his precious blood.

And we shall see it made complete when he returns forever. We've seen it coming because our Lord Jesus Christ, the risen one, has said to us, Behold, I'm coming soon.

- [20 : 11] We've seen it. And so we sing for joy. But way down inside the city walls, there are hordes of people who haven't yet seen it, who haven't yet heard those glad tidings, who don't yet know of the wonderful gospel of hope.

Imagine, imagine, imagine if those beautiful feet had never brought that message of hope. Or the watchman had never passed on that wonderful message of hope.

The city would just still be in mourning and in darkness, wouldn't it? Would still be in despair, not, not because there was no hope of the coming of the king again, but just because all the people there had never heard of that glorious message and that certain hope.

And that's why the Apostle Paul quotes these words with such passion in Romans chapter 10. Just listen as we close.

How are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

[21 : 37] And how are they to preach unless they're sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news. without the beautiful feet there's no wonderful message and there's no song of joy.

So we need beautiful feet, don't we? Let's pray that the Lord will make all of us people with beautiful feet, feet that wherever they tread they carry those glad tidings of great joy to this dark world.

Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you for the glorious glad tidings and the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How we praise you that eye to eye you have allowed us to see clearly the return of the Lord. Give us, we pray, feet beautiful because they are fitted with a readiness that comes of the gospel of peace.

And may we run with it all the days of our lives to bring joy where there's pain, bring light where there's darkness, to bring life in the shadow of death for the sake of our glorious Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 05] Amen.