

CHRISTMAS 2017

Week One | November 26, 2017 | Hope

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone in God's Word reading through Isaiah 61:1–11 and Luke 4:16–21. Pray that God would bring to life the truths of this text and encourage others with the truth of Scripture.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in this week's guide. Many questions have been included in this lesson for discussion. Determine which questions will work well to encourage, push, and grow your love for God and others in the best way.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together with your group; that the Spirit would make effective the teaching to bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those present.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Christians experience hope as they look up at God's character, back to what Christ has done, forward to heaven, and around at the lost who need the gospel.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we choose to look in these directions, we experience grounding hope instead of aimless despair.

MEDITATE

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

- Q: *Why are people so interested in hope during the holiday season?*
- Q: *Why do you think Christian hope is different than worldly hope?*
- Q: *How would you feel if you were on an important journey, but had no bearings or perspective to chart the course?*

As many adventurers will tell you, there's nothing quite like riding in a hot-air balloon. Seeing the lay of the land from a bird's-eye view, taking in the crisp air and colorful landscapes, and feeling the rush of adrenalin that comes with literally hanging in mid-air can have an invigorating effect on anyone brave enough to enter the balloon's basket. Though they are popular tourist attractions, many people don't actually understand the way hot-air balloons navigate through the air. According to experts, the most important part of safety for hot-air ballooning, other than propane burners, is the presence of four sandbags that hang from the outside of the basket. As the propane provides the hot air needed for the basket to rise, the sandbags weigh down the basket just enough to balance the upward force. As the pilot navigates the basket to a safe layer of air—one that provides a spectacular view, but not so high that it compromises breathability—he throws over just enough of the sand, one bag at a time, to keep the balloon from shooting upward too quickly. Without the sandbags, the balloon could drift off aimlessly, not only preventing the participants from enjoying the proper view, but jeopardizing their very lives.

From the reports of many horror stories over the years, there's nothing more hopeless than being trapped above in the air, with no bearings on where you are going. But with the right number of sandbags to steady and balance the course, hope and enjoyment can be found in the ride, even if the basket faces some unexpected winds. In many ways, our Christian hope works the same way, as we will see in Isaiah 61 and Luke 4. Instead of floating aimlessly through life, God has given us four "sandbags"—four directions to look—that give us safety, hope, and a proper perspective on life. Without these four directions held in balance, our perspective and bearings will be compromised, leaving us hopeless and fearful. With them, we are given the bearings we need, and we can remain hopeful no matter what type of turbulence we encounter.

Q: *Why do we sometimes float aimlessly through life, feeling hopeless?*

Q: *Share a season of life when you were extremely hopeful. What gave you that hope? Or, share a time when you felt hopeless. What took your hope away?*

II UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In this Christmas series, we are learning about four concepts commonly referenced during the holidays—*hope, peace, joy, and love*. While our culture uses them in worldly or even shallow ways, we will look at them through a Biblical lens so that we may define these concepts the way God does. First, we will look at the Biblical concept of hope.

Today the word “hope” usually means nothing more than wishful thinking. We often hear people say, “I hope I get an A on that paper,” “I hope my team wins,” or “I hope it doesn’t rain today.” In all of these statements, hope is nothing more than a wish for something good to happen.

Of course, people need to have hope—it keeps them going. Present hurts and uncertainty over what the future holds create the constant need for hope. Worldwide poverty, hunger, disease, terrorism, and destruction create a yearning for something better. Historically, people have looked to the future with a mixture of longing and fear. Many have concluded that there is no reasonable basis for hope. Therefore, “to hope” is to live with an illusion. This viewpoint is partially correct; Scripture tells us that those who do not have God in their lives do not have hope (Eph. 2:12).

The Greek term *elpis* denotes “confident expectation” or “anticipation,” not “wishful thinking.” Hope is consequently an expectation or belief in the fulfillment of God’s promises. Biblical hope is hope in what God will do in the future.¹

Biblical hope is “favorable and confident expectation.”²

In Isaiah 61:1–11, we learn about the ultimate hope God’s people looked forward to, an anointed Messiah that would come with a saving message and power to restore all that is broken. In Luke 4:16–21, we see their hope finally fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As we study these selected passages, we will learn four major directions we should look in order to grab hold of the hope we have in the Anointed One:

- 1. HOPE LOOKS UP AT WHO GOD IS**
- 2. HOPE LOOKS FORWARD AT WHAT GOD WILL DO**
- 3. HOPE LOOKS BACK AT WHAT GOD HAS DONE**
- 4. HOPE LOOKS AROUND FOR THOSE GOD WANTS TO SAVE**

+ This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's Biblical truth.

HOPE LOOKS UP AT WHO GOD IS

❏ ISAIAH 61:1-11

🔍: *How many times do you see "Lord" or "God" mentioned in these verses? What do you think the author is trying to communicate?*

🔍: *What characteristics of God do you see in this passage?*

It's certainly not wrong to put our hope in something God offers, whether that's some sort of promise, some future reality we know is coming, something He has done for us, or truths He gives us to help us navigate a world swirling with lies. However, before hoping in any of those precious gifts, we must first hope in God, who is the source of all these things. In other words, before looking at any one gift to put our hope in, we must first look up at the Giver and understand what He's like. Learning to put our hope in God's promises and His work on our behalf is vital, but only if we know the person behind the promises and the work is trustworthy, which is exactly what Isaiah shows us. As we observe what the prophet teaches us about God's character in this passage, we will learn how to ground all our hopes in God Himself.

As we move through Isaiah 61, our hope is kindled by witnessing who God is, as seen in the ways He relates with His people. This passage helps us "look up" and see God as an anointer (v. 1), a sender (v. 1), an avenger of the oppressed (v. 2), a comforter (v. 2), a giver of good things (v. 3), a planter and restorer (v. 3), a minster-maker (v. 6), a justice-enforcer (v. 8), a faithful God (v. 8), a covenant-maker (v. 8), a blessing (v. 9), a cloth and deliverer (v. 10), a husband to His people (v. 10), a righteousness-creator (v. 11), and a praise-inducer (v. 11). These things were true of God in the time of Isaiah, and they are true of God today, for us.

As we "look up" at these characteristics of God, we can't help but bubble up with hope, for who else but the Lord has such perfect, trustworthy, good character? Through Isaiah's message, we realize that God's promises and work are

guaranteed by His character. By studying who God is in this passage first, our gaze is raised, and our hope is put in the right place.

- ❓ *Summarize why understanding God's character is foundational for hoping in His promises and work on our behalf.*
- ❓ *If you are honest, where else are you tempted to look for hope in difficult seasons when you aren't looking to God?*
- ❓ *From observations you've made about the Lord in this passage, why is looking to God a better place to find hope than the other places we are tempted to look for it?*
- ❓ *Which of God's characteristics, as seen in Isaiah 61, strikes you as refreshing or surprising?*
- ❓ *Compare how the world sees God with how Isaiah 61 depicts Him.*

HOPE LOOKS FORWARD AT WHAT GOD WILL DO

❏ ISAIAH 61:1-11 (AGAIN)

- ❓ *Point out some places where Isaiah speaks of what God will do in the future.*
- ❓ *What are some of the tasks the Anointed One will accomplish?*

In Isaiah's day, even after various warnings from God about their sin, the Israelites did not show many signs of compassion, obedience, or repentance. Very few lived righteously before the Lord, and those who chose to do so suffered for it (Is. 57:1-2). The majority had abandoned God to follow after false gods (Is. 57:3-11). Due to this sin, God's people experienced judgment for their rebellion in the Babylonian exile. While scholars debate whether Isaiah is speaking to God's people currently in exile or returned from exile, the prophet's goal is still clear. He

wants to help the Israelites have hope in what God would eventually do for them, painting a restorative picture of their future.

Whether they are in exile or returning from exile, they wonder, will God still remember us now? And what of this homeland we are supposed to return to? Will God have anything to say about our beloved Zion, a place ruined by various wars over many generations? What about those who are mourning over the sin they see, as well as the destruction of their home? And how are we supposed to function now with other nations? How are we supposed to function as a people? Being in exile and returning from exile is one thing, but starting all over is quite another! What will our new life look like when this painful season is over? What will life look like in eternity? It is against this backdrop that Isaiah speaks on behalf of the Lord, telling the people to look forward to what God will do for them through the coming Messiah.

First and most importantly, Isaiah directs God's people to look forward to not just a future position, power, or predicament, but a future person—the “anointed” one—who will come to inaugurate a new day among the people, equipped by the very Spirit of God. When this Messiah comes, He will be marked by a clear ministry of preaching, proclaiming liberty to those in bondage, bringing good news to the poor, healing the brokenhearted, declaring the day of God's vengeance, and comforting those who mourn. His presence will bring a season of rebuilding and restoration for the Holy Land, great reward for the righteous, and praise from the nations. In a word, the Anointed One offered a future hope and home that every Israelite in exile desperately longed for.

While Isaiah 61 surely points to an Anointed One who would come with good news to a world riddled by sin and suffering, it points even further to a time when sin and suffering will be no more. In other words, Isaiah gives us hope by pointing to what eternity will be like, a time where God's people (“oaks of righteousness,” planted by God Himself) will finally bear righteous fruit instead of bad fruit, and the earth will be renewed in totality. To show their thanks for this transformation, the people will give God glory forever and experience everlasting joy. It is by looking forward to the Anointed One and the eternal era this Anointed One would bring that God's people could have great hope, even in times of dark affliction. The same is true for us. As we look to what God promises He will do in our eternal future, we can have great hope for today.

Q: *Why is it sometimes difficult to believe God will eventually restore things that are currently broken or painful?*

Q: *In what ways can you relate with the “afflicted” who are hearing this message for the first time?*

Q: *Why is it easy to think about “this life” or “this season” as ultimate reality instead of the life that is to come?*

HOPE LOOKS BACK AT WHAT GOD HAS DONE

■ LUKE 4:16–21

Q: *By reading this section of Luke, what is Jesus trying to communicate to those in the synagogue?*

Q: *Does Jesus believe He is acting on His own? Why or why not?*

Q: *Why do we often forget what God has done for us in the past?*

These verses in Luke’s gospel show us the official start to Jesus’ public ministry. Some assert that Jesus considered Himself merely a nice guy doing nice things, and the title of “Messiah” was given to him in later times by some of his radical followers. As this passage shows, nothing could be further from the truth. We see from the Scriptures that Jesus was well aware of His anointing from the first day of His ministry, as He clearly tells those listening that the promise of the Anointed One has been fulfilled in Himself. He knew He was the Messiah God’s people had been hoping to see for so long, and now was the time to publicly say so. All their long-held hope had finally come to fruition. Here was the One who would usher in a new time of salvation and, eventually, a new heavens and a new earth!

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 to make His position crystal clear. He affirms that God’s Spirit is what empowers Him, that He is anointed, and that He came for Messianic purposes. As we think on His words, we realize they have double meaning. He did bring good news to the financially poor of His time, but also to the spiritually bankrupt who needed God to give them the riches only available in the gospel. He did proclaim liberty to captives as He valued those in prison, but He also came to set free those who were enslaved to their sin. He did give sight to the blind in His ministry, but as a sign that pointed to His ability to open the eyes of dead sinners, making them finally able to see the truth of the gospel. Ultimately, all of Jesus’ ministry was to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” a new era similar to the Jewish Year of Jubilee, in which debts are forgiven in His name, slaves are set free, and God’s salvation

is offered to all through His death and resurrection. All the Jews had hoped for was finally here in the person of Christ, to rebuild all that had gone wrong if they'd only believe.

While Israel looked forward in hope at the coming Messiah, we can look back at this incredible moment that the Messiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, was publicly revealed for the first time. We no longer have to hope for the Messiah to set us free, open our eyes, and heal our sin. He has already come! He is the Anointed One we've all hoped for, but we no longer have to look forward in anticipation for Him to begin His work. He has come. He has saved us. No matter what circumstance we face, in order to grab hold of hope, all we must do is look back at what God has done for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

🕒: *How often do you remind yourself to look back at all Christ has done for you? How does looking back help you in the "right now" of life's difficulties?*

🕒: *What keeps you from looking back at the freedom Jesus purchased for you on the cross?*

HOPE LOOKS AROUND FOR THOSE GOD WANTS TO SAVE

🗄️ ISAIAH 61:5-7

🕒: *Who will be among God's people in the future, according to verse 5? Why would this have been shocking for traditional Hebrews to hear?*

🕒: *Do you think God's love for the Gentiles is a New Testament thing, or have they been on His heart all along?*

In this portion of Isaiah 61, the author describes something surprising about the renewed city God's people will enjoy in the future, namely, that it will have non-Hebrews in it! All along, God has wanted His people to be faithful ministers to the lost world, a light to the Gentiles, and a people set apart to share the hope they have in Christ with the outsider (Ex. 19:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:9, 3:15; Rom. 15:7-13) so that they may worship Him together. Finally, in this redeemed city, God's people will clearly have done their job by including those of other nations in their midst. Just as the Messiah was anointed to proclaim freedom for them, so now they have proclaimed liberty to the lost Gentiles

who have joined their family. Indeed, the overall purpose of the Messiah was to bring deliverance to God's people so the Gentiles would see the Lord's incredible work and turn to Him too.

In light of these verses, we must not only look up at God, back at what Christ has done, and forward to heaven, we must look around for those who don't know God and invite them to cast their eyes to the same places we do. The hope we have in Christ was not only meant to fill us, but to flow through us to everyone God puts in our path. When the new heavens and earth eventually do come, we want to know we extended the hope we have to everyone outside, inviting them in through the message of the gospel. As Jesus gave us great hope, we offer the very same hope to non-believers, praying they will repent and trust in Christ. As He was anointed to give us the hope of salvation, we are anointed to go and preach this great hope to others (Jn. 20:21).

🕒: *Where do lost people look for hope? Have you ever shared with lost friends where you find hope during dark times in your life?*

🕒: *What holds you back from sharing the hope you have in Christ with others?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

🕒: *How can you make a practice of "looking up" at God's character more often in your daily life?*

🕒: *Isaiah 61 gives God's people future promises to hold on to during a season of affliction. What are some other Scriptural references we can use to "look forward," reminding ourselves of our future hope of heaven?*

🕒: *Take some time to "look back" at all God has done for you in your life, including how He opened your eyes to the gospel.*

Q: *Who in your life needs you to offer them hope this season? Who needs to hear about the God we look up to, the Messiah's work we look back on, and the new heavens and earth we look forward to? Approach that person this week and "proclaim good news," just as Christ did for you.*

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.

- God, I look up to You right now in thanks for Your character. Thank You for being my comforting, loving, equipping, avenging, sending, delivering, and faithful God.
- God, give me a heavenly perspective that looks forward to the life I'll have forever in the new heavens and the new earth. Help that coming day give me hope in my daily life right now.
- God, when I struggle to believe You are good or present during affliction, please remind me of Christ's death and resurrection on my behalf. As I look back on all You've done for me in the gospel, give me fresh hope.
- God, reveal to me lost friends and family in my life who need to be invited into the hope I have in Christ.

COMMENTARY

ISAIAH 61:2; LUKE 4:18–19 A striking observation for Biblical scholars is that Jesus leaves out “the day of vengeance of our God” when quoting Isaiah. Jesus' hearers would have expected that the day of their own salvation would also be the day of judgment for their pagan enemies. However, the delay of judgment communicates that this season of the Lord's favor also benefits the Gentiles, not just the Jews.

ISAIAH 61:8 The eternal covenant mentioned here is likely a reference to the Davidic covenant where God promised to provide a ruler for David's throne for all eternity (2 Sam. 7), which will be the throne from which

Christ (David's descendent) will rule in the new heavens and earth.

LUKE 4:19 “The year of the Lord’s favor” is another way of saying the “good news of the kingdom of God.” In other words, Christ was claiming that God’s kingdom had come, and a new era was now in motion, giving a window of opportunity for all people (both Jew and Gentile) to benefit from God’s salvation. This season would not last forever, though, which is why many of Jesus’ recorded words contain an urgency for people to repent and draw near to the Lord while they can.

LUKE 4:21 When Jesus says that the Scripture has been fulfilled “today,” He is not referring to a 24-hour period of time only. He means that the messianic age is finally realized with His coming. The period of salvation, offered to all, extends from that moment through the time of the early church, and even until today. This window of opportunity to embrace the gospel will end when Christ returns.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, The NIV Compact Bible Commentary, the New American Commentary (Isaiah and Luke), and the Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Luke-Acts and Proverbs-Isaiah).*

ENDNOTES

1. Carpenter, E. E., & Comfort, P. W. (2000). In *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (p. 305). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
2. Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, W., Jr. (1996). *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Vol. 2, p. 311). Nashville, TN: T. Nelson.

