

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

God's rescue plan

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! Helen Keller once observed that 'life is either a daring adventure or nothing.' I wonder, though, whether you think of the Christian life as 'a daring adventure'? For many people the Christian life seems like a dull, adventure-less routine. Sadly, if that's our view, we won't be very enthusiastic about living as a Christian.

When I was young I thought of the Christian life in terms of duties and activities – such as attending church, learning about the Bible, praying to God, and treating other people with respect and love. These things are good, but they did not excite me a great deal! For me the Christian life was just one part of several strands in my life.

What changed everything for me was coming to a fuller understanding at the age of 18. I realised that the Christian life is participation in a rescue operation – God's rescue operation. God has rescued me through his Son, the Lord Jesus, and he calls me be part of his rescue operation to a lost and broken world.

This morning, let's explore that way of thinking about the Christian life, and reflect on how that view brings adventure, purpose and joy in our daily lives.

.....

One of the ways I do my work as a pastor is to serve as chaplain to the local police who are based in our suburb. Earlier this year I was proud of three local police who volunteered to go on a special flight to Christchurch and join with the New Zealand police. The task of policing that city devastated by earthquakes was clearly too much for the New Zealand police. The 122 reinforcements from Australia helped maintain law and order over the city, and support emergency services. They also helped to find the bodies of those who died. They had to endure further tremors and dust storms. To go on a rescue operation like that involved hardship and trauma, leaving their families behind - but these Australian police were willing to make those sacrifices.

The Christian life can be seen as participation in God's rescue operation. God's rescue operation is on a much bigger and deeper scale than the Christchurch rescue. In the Gospel of Luke we read that when Jesus commenced his public ministry he began by speaking in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He selected a passage from the Book of Isaiah, and read these words: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19).

This quote Jesus chose was from one of five poems or songs in the Book of Isaiah that are commonly called 'Servant Songs.' These songs portray a man who is God's Perfect Servant. He chooses the path of humiliation and suffering so that he can undo all the horrendous and degrading effects that sin has had on the human race, and restore to people their true freedom and dignity as sons and daughters of God. When Jesus finished his reading from Isaiah, he began his message with these words: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in

your hearing' (Luke 4:21). Jesus was declaring that his mission was to be this Servant predicted by the prophet Isaiah, to begin God's rescue operation.

It's interesting to look more closely at the text in Isaiah 61 that Jesus quoted. In that text the Lord's Servant explains the tasks he will accomplish. He has been sent by God on a 'rescue operation.' The world is broken due to human sin and rebellion against God. Our hearts are broken too. The Servant describes the sadness and mess of human life due to our sin: he uses terms like 'poverty', 'broken-heartedness', 'captivity', 'prison', 'mourning', 'grieving' and 'despair'. Here is an accurate description of the human race, rebellious against God, and consequently trapped by sin, both our own sin and the sin of others.

Yet the Servant came to rescue the human race from those terrible results of sin.

.....

This morning we're exploring an important way of thinking about the Christian life - as participation in God's rescue operation. When Jesus presented his first message in public, it was based on the Servant Song from Isaiah 61:1-3. In an earlier Servant Song, Isaiah 53, the prophet describes how the Servant will suffer and die for our sin, in our place, and will be raised from the dead (Isa 52:13-53:12).

Now in the final Servant Song in Isaiah 61 the Servant proclaims 'good news', 'healing', 'freedom', 'release' (v.1); he declares God's 'favour' and 'comfort' (v.2); and bestows the 'insteads': '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' (v.3a). What a wonderful result from God's rescue operation - instead of all this terrible human sadness and pain, the Servant will transform suffering people so they will be like strong and vibrant trees: 'They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour' (v.3b).

This makes me think of John Newton, the writer of the famous hymn 'Amazing Grace.' In his early life John Newton drifted along with no clear purpose, became a sailor, on one occasion was flogged for desertion and spent over a year as a slave in Africa. For years he was captain of a slave ship. He certainly needed rescuing! He personally discovered God's amazing grace in the Lord Jesus. John Newton committed his life to Christ, and his life dramatically changed. He became involved in God's rescue operation. Eventually he became ordained as an Anglican priest, and worked to build up the Christian community through encouraging people to faith in Christ, and built up the human community through deeds of justice and service.

In particular, Newton influenced his friend William Wilberforce to lobby for the abolition of the British involvement in the African slave trade. John Newton was rescued by Jesus Christ, then committed himself to rescuing others who needed God's care and deliverance.

In his book *The reason for God* Tim Keller writes that in Jesus' rescue operation he came 'to restore justice to the oppressed and marginalized, physical wholeness to the diseased and dying, community to the isolated and lonely, and spiritual joy and connection to those isolated from God' (*The reason for God*, p.224-5).

It makes a huge difference to our daily lives when we see the Christian life as a rescue operation. We ourselves can receive God's rescue as we turn from our sin and place our faith in Jesus. We can have a real sense of excitement and adventure as we participate in this rescue mission, giving ourselves to serve and love those whose lives are broken by sin. This vision of the Christian life makes a huge difference for a local church as well, if we see our purpose as God's people to play a part in God's rescue mission to our local district and to the world.

.....

This morning we're thinking about what it means to see the Christian life as participation in God's rescue mission. Jesus announced in his first message that he came to transform the lives of people in a broken world. He was fulfilling the picture of God's Servant in the Book of Isaiah. That same rescue operation is still going on today. If we believe in Jesus and follow him, we are servants of God too. To be a Christian is to be part of that same rescue operation.

All around us are people who are suffering from the horrible consequences of sin. These people are in our families, our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our local suburbs. Often we are too busy or distracted to notice all these people who need rescue. Sometimes we are so busy with Christian events and church functions that we do not have time to serve and care for those who are lost and broken.

One of the challenges about being involved in a rescue operation is that all of us, to some extent, need rescuing ourselves. When we turn from our sin and place our faith in Christ, we become Christians, we receive God's forgiveness. But we still have a sinful nature that continues to make a mess and lead us into sin. We battle each day with sins like pride, laziness, selfishness, greed, and indifference to the needs of others. Some of us have addictions that overpower us too often: like pornography, too much alcohol, gambling, too much time playing computer games. Some of us have been hurt and bruised by life, and we nurse our wounds, we remain bitter and angry. To some extent we can identify with the various people Jesus came to rescue: the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mourners, the grieving ones, the despairing.

Perhaps this morning you need to be honest about the extent to which you still need rescuing yourself. When Jesus identified himself with Isaiah's portrayal of God's Perfect Servant, he made it clear he is the strong deliverer and rescuer. He died and was raised as God's Perfect Servant, at great cost (Isa 52:13-53:12), and now he proclaims his rescue operation. If you commit yourself to him he will do his deep work of rescue in your heart and life. There is no need for you to go on being defeated by sin and trapped by your failures. Trust the Lord Jesus to transform you as his Holy Spirit gives you new desires and new strength.

Despite your imperfections, you are still called to share in the rescue mission that's entrusted to all servants of Christ. Don't be an inward-looking Christian, but commit yourself to looking outward at the needs of the many that are lost and broken by a sinful world. Commit yourself to pointing people to the One who is the Great Rescuer, who alone can deliver them from sin and its terrible consequences. It's encouraging to know that one day when the Lord Jesus returns he will complete his work of rescue, and his rescued people will live with him forever in a wonderful new creation.

.....

The Christian life is participation in God's rescue operation. Jesus began his public ministry by explaining he came to rescue people who need forgiveness, justice, healing and loving community. To be a Christian today is to become part of that same operation, with the expectation of suffering and hardship, *and* the joyful assurance of eventual success when the Lord Jesus returns and restores the creation. Such a life is truly a grand adventure!

Let me pray for you: 'Heavenly Father, thank you for your amazing grace and kindness you have shown us. You loved so much you sent your dear Son, Jesus, to die in our place on the cross. You have rescued us from sin, evil, and death. We offer ourselves to you to be your servants, contributing to your rescue operation in this broken world. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.'