

## Reclaiming the Bible

Robert McAfee Brown, *Reclaiming the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994),

### Is. 61: 1-5

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring **good news to the oppressed,**  
to bind up the **brokenhearted,**  
to proclaim liberty to the **captives,**  
and release to the **prisoners;**  
2 to proclaim the **year of the LORD's favor,**  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
**to comfort all who mourn;**  
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion--  
to give them a **garland instead of ashes,**  
**the oil of gladness** instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a **faint spirit.**  
They will be called **oaks of righteousness,**  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.  
4 They shall **build up the ancient ruins,**  
they shall raise **up the former devastations;**  
they shall **repair the ruined cities,**  
**the devastations** of many generations.  
5 **Strangers** shall stand and feed your flocks,  
**foreigners** shall till your land and dress your vines;

This is the Scripture text Jesus read in the Synagogue of Nazareth as his Messianic agenda. The passage originally written around the fifth century B.C.

McAfee Brown calls this text "reversal." Reversal is that those who have been conditioned to expect bad news to continue are now promised good news. Things are going to change. Isaiah backs up his claims with examples. The brokenhearted," instead of being further pummeled by life, will have their wounds bound up; they will be healed. The "captives," instead of being still more tightly constricted, will be liberated. The "prisoners," instead of being denied parole, or having their sentences further extended, will discover that the prison doors are open, and they are free.

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**Jubilee:** McAfee Brown moves the text further by asserting, "But we won't have done full justice to the text until we consider the *overall reversal* to which Isaiah points: he must also "proclaim the year of God's favor," which is what the book of Leviticus had called "a jubilee year." This was to take place every fifty years, and it had some exhilarating and alarming characteristics: (1) *All debts would be canceled.* (2) *All slaves would be free.* (3) Capital would be redistributed. All ill-gotten gains will

be redistributed so that the ordinary folks can start all over again and look ahead with hope. The vision of jubilee year never actually got off the ground, But it has remained ever since as a *symbol of hope* – a centrally biblical hope – a declaration that things don't have to stay the way they are. There can be change, not just for the worse but for the better, and the victims, the poor, the afflicted are the targets of this message. *Things can be reversed*. Whether that's good news or bad news depends on whether we are on the top or the bottom of the heap.

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The promise of reversals is extended to a second group of people, "*all who mourn*," those for whom joy has become alien, whose inner lives, if not their circumstances, have been terribly scarred, for whom the bottom seems to have dropped out of things... Instead of ashes (symbols of defeat or destruction), you'll get a "garland" (the prize that ancient world was given to those who won an athletic contest, analogous to getting a gold medal in the Olympics today). "Mourning" will be replaced by the "oil of gladness" (a reversal easily understood in a culture where the act of anointing with oil was an indication of God's favor). In Isaiah's time it was a clear metaphor for moving from mourning to joy. "... Faint spirit" is an expression of fear and timidity and powerlessness, there will be mantle of praise."

Robert McAfee Brown, *Reclaiming the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 36.

**Demand:** Those who experience reversals will become "*oaks of righteousness*," planted by God. Oaks are noted for being durable and large and strong, in contrast to weak reeds or tiny trees that can't survive heavy winds or bad weather. For the afflicted and those who mourn, the gift of new beginnings is given without any strings attached. But when God promises to make us "*oaks of righteousness*," a task is imposed. If we truly to be "*oaks of righteousness*," we are to bestir ourselves, and participate directly in creating new conditions for others. *We are to be the instruments through whom God brings about the reversals*. This text doesn't just give us a promise, it gives us a series of marching orders. The agenda that is laid on the "*oaks of righteousness*":

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations (Is. 61:4).

The ruling *imperatives* is equally strong. The verbs Isaiah marshals: "build up ... raise up ... repair." Those are verbs that are meant to describe us. We are not to sit back and wait for God to do all that. We are to be the ones *through whom* God does all that. To the degree that God has effected reversals in our lives, we must work to effect reversals in other people's lives.

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