

# A Bride Adorned

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3 | Psalm 148 | Galatians 4:4-7 | Luke 2:15-21

## ISAIAH 61:10 – 62:3

<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. <sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. <sup>1</sup> For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. <sup>2</sup> The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. <sup>3</sup> You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

## INTRODUCTION

August 7, 2004. Rockefeller Chapel, a Gothic Revival chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago that was built between 1925 and 1928 and seats approximately 1,700 people. The primary patron was, of course, John D. Rockefeller. And it is the location of ecumenical worship services, concerts, university convocations, and special events. As many of you are aware, I do not often get personal in sermons, but on August 7, 2004, it was the location that Angela and I got married. It was nearly 20 years ago, and yet I remember it vividly—I also have pictures on my phone, if you want to see. A couple hundred friends and family gathered into the front of the nave. The massive pipe organ was played. I stood there in my rented tuxedo, flanked by six groomsmen. And then, to the sound of the *Overture from Feuerwerksmusik*, by George Friedrich Handel, Angela processed the more than 60-meter aisle to the sanctuary. Her hair was up. Her eyes were beaming. Her dress—I didn't know champagne is also a colour until that day—was radiant. It was perfect representation of a celebratory, glorious new beginning. In the months that followed, after wrestling with it a bit and despite its troubling origin in English common law, she took my last name—as a joyful symbol of our unity. We were a new thing that had never existed before, a new family, and it was amazing.

Wedding imagery often evokes that sense of something new coming about.<sup>1</sup> That's why a couple will often take the same name, move in together, combine resources. They are united into a single legal entity, joined together into a new home. And such an occasion is a very good reason to joyful. This imagery is how our reading from Isaiah begins, a reading that teaches us something very important about what it means to be saved by the Lord. That is, being saved by the Lord's Messiah makes us his new people. Being saved by the Lord's Messiah makes us his new people. And that, my dear friends, is a very good reason to rejoice. But to see it, let's take a closer look.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of male/female wedding/marriage imagery and language throughout this sermon should not be construed as any kind of comment on the current discussions around marriage in the Church of England. Rather, they reflect either 1) my own marriage as between a male and a female is a historical fact, or 2) the biblical use of wedding/marriage imagery and language refers, without exception, to a male and a female. I am simply reflecting the use of the imagery and language as I find it in the texts to which I am referring.

## 1. A DECLARATION OF RESCUE (ISAIAH 62:1-3)

I want to begin with the last few verses of the passage, where we see in fairly literal terms, what it means for the Lord's Messiah to save his people. The context of the whole book is, as it was two weeks ago when I preached on the passage just before this, very important. The first 39 chapters of the book establish the theme of God's judgment against his people for their sins. They have been a selfish, idolatrous, wicked, and corrupt people, and God is about to hand them over to slavery in Babylon as a punishment. The next section, chapters 40-55, begins to describe what happens after. Despite deserving far greater judgment, there is a hope of restoration. Through the Messiah, who is both a suffering servant and triumphant king, atonement will be made and God will rescue his people. The final section of the book, and the one in which our passage is found, explores the implications of that restoration. What does it mean for this Messiah to save God's people?

And so, we find in our passage: *"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest..."*<sup>2</sup> The *I* in this passage is the Messiah, the one appointed by God, anointed by God, to proclaim good news to the poor.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit of the Lord has rested upon this Messiah for this task. And so, in our passage, he comes to do just that, to proclaim a message of vindication for God's people. The references to Zion and Jerusalem are—and I want to be very clear in the current political climate—they are broad references to God's people, not to a place or a national or ethnic identity. Paul will make very clear in the New Testament who is and who is not Israel in the sense of being God's people.<sup>4</sup> And what is the message? He will declare that *"...her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch."*<sup>5</sup> This is not vindication in the sense of declaring innocence. The first two-thirds of the book establish the guilt of God's people beyond all doubt. This is vindication in the sense that they are no longer under the judgment of God, he has declared them free. He has saved them. They are no longer to be in exile in Babylon. And the world, the nations, will see that God has rescued them and brought them home.

## 2. A ROBE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (ISAIAH 62:2-3, 61:10)

In fact, this is where the passage picks up on the marriage language for a second time. But let's look at both instances together. Back up in the first verse: *"...for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."*<sup>6</sup> And then at the end: *"and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God."*<sup>7</sup> The Messiah comes to rescue God's people like a bridegroom comes to take his wife. He is decked in his finest robes, for it is a moment of celebration. The bride is there, presented in all her splendour. It is the time of the marriage, the uniting of God and his redeemed people. And she is given her new name, a name given by the Lord, a name that enhances her, that reveals her glory to the world, that demonstrates his

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<sup>2</sup> Isa 62:1.

<sup>3</sup> It can be difficult to discern who is speaking throughout this section, as the Lord, the Lord's Messiah, and the prophet all speak and their voices merge into each other in various places. From Isa 61:1, the one speaking in the first person is the Messiah, the one anointed by God to proclaim the good news. He is still speaking throughout this passage.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Romans 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> Isa 62:1.

<sup>6</sup> Isa 61:10.

<sup>7</sup> Isa 62:2-3.

profound love for her. Indeed, the verses that follow make it even clearer: *“You shall no more be termed Forsaken,”* but rather, *“as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”*<sup>8</sup> The rescue of the Lord is like that of a marriage, a joyful symbol of unity and new life—the other image referenced here (but we will not take the time to unpack it here).<sup>9</sup> Rather, this marriage image is one of the most frequent in the Bible. The Old Testament prophets reference it frequently: from God pledging himself to his people as to a bride in Ezekiel, telling his people that he married them in Jeremiah, or loving them despite their unfaithfulness in a grand analogy in Hosea.<sup>10</sup> The New Testament likewise picks it up—whether it is how the church is presented as a bride to Christ in 2 Corinthians, or how Revelation describes the consummation of all things in the wedding feast of the Lamb.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. AN ACT OF REDEMPTION

God loves his people as a husband loves a wife, which brings us to a final question. How is it that a perfect God is able to marry, to joyfully unite with, to join together with his imperfect people? In this book, in Isaiah, it is explained nine chapters earlier when the Messiah, the suffering servant, gives his life as an offering for the sin of his people.<sup>12</sup> Paul, in his analogical reflections in Ephesians 5, on Christ as the bridegroom of the church, puts it like this: *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word...”*<sup>13</sup> Christ gave his life so that the bride would be redeemed. Whatever you think about the equality between man and woman in marriage today, that was not, and never has been, the case with Christ and the Church. That is an unequal marriage—the groom without sin and perfectly righteous, the bride needing to be made so. And yet, that groom gave his life on a cross so that she would be worthy of marriage, so that she could be united with him, so that we would be united with him. What greater reason could we have to rejoice? What more beautiful union is there than a holy God with his redeemed people?

What greater example could we have in how we behave toward our loved ones? Make no mistake, when it says the Lord will cause righteousness to spring up in his people, it is not merely a state of righteousness, but a life of righteous living.<sup>14</sup> And in this, the bridegroom not only secures righteousness for us, but show us to live righteously through his self-sacrifice.

### CONCLUSION

As the new year sets in, as we leave 2023 behind and look to 2024, let us begin here. A new year is like a marriage, a brand-new thing, a chance to reset, a new relationship, a new opportunity to be the rescued, saved, redeemed people of God. Let us not look back and forget the cost to our bridegroom, to the crucified and risen Christ. But let us begin this year with the truth that

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<sup>8</sup> Isa 62:4-5. The second reference may not seem, initially, to be marriage language. However, the two verses that follow (and which are not included in the passage) make it explicit: *“You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”*

<sup>9</sup> Like marriage, the rescue of the Lord is compared to the new life in a garden throughout the passage. It is explicit here in Isa 61:1. But also see Isa 62:4-5 for further references.

<sup>10</sup> Ezek 16:8, Jer 3:14, Hosea 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Cor 11:1-4, Rev 19:1-10.

<sup>12</sup> See Isa 53:3-10, especially Isa 53:10.

<sup>13</sup> Eph 5:25-27.

<sup>14</sup> Isa 61:11. See also Phil 3:8-11. See also my sermon from December 17, 2023, on Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11.

being saved by the Lord's Messiah makes us his new people.<sup>15</sup> Let us live in the righteousness he has given us, wearing the crown he has given us, bearing the name we have received. And let us remember, that most fundamental gospel truth, so beautifully captured in Samuel John Stone's great hymn:

The church's one foundation  
is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
she is his new creation  
by water and the word:  
from heaven he came and sought her  
to be his holy Bride;  
with his own blood he bought her  
and for her life he died.<sup>16</sup>

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you loving us so much that you gave your Son up to death on a cross in order to redeem us, to make us new. May we, in this new year, rejoice in our union with you. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, 2 Cor 5:16-18 or Eph 4:17-24.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel John Stone, "The Church's One Foundation," 1866.