

## Isaiah 61 – part two

### January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Wow, what a worship service we've had so far and from the perspective of the person who knows what I am going to be talking about this morning, God has clearly been orchestrating this a fantastic prelude to my sermon. From the message of the songs we've been singing to the meditation that Grant shared about God being our Helper – the whole flow has been amazing.

But for me personally, the definitive event, this morning, which touched my heart the most was singing together the hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul." It's been a special privilege to sing this song almost my entire life. The words are so powerful and because of that it's been one of my favorite worship songs all of these years.

Additionally, I'm well familiar with the powerful story behind the writing of this hymn. The author, Horatio Spafford, was inspired to write this song out of his own personal tragedy.

What made the singing of this song so special this morning was who was standing beside me singing it. With tears streaming down their faces, both Lynn and Rose Harvey were looking to God and proclaiming to Him that it is well with their souls. This after finding out this week that her cancer has returned in her back and they are currently awaiting word on how to proceed with the treatment this time around. So, while Rose's body is not "well" their spirits are "well" because God is on His throne and He is still in charge and He knows what Rose is going through and He is walking with her through this journey. That makes it well with her soul and what can transform any situation we may go through as well. The key is to be aware of the physical or emotional challenge you're facing right now but to direct your focus onto God and His goodness.

It's this promised transformation that God promised through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 61.

**Isaiah 61:1 (NIV)** ...*God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners*

It's all about **perspective** and what you're allowing your heart and mind to dwell on. Do you allow your heart and mind to focus on the disappointments and heartaches of this world or do you instead train your heart and mind to focus on the goodness and the greatness and the many blessings of the Lord in the midst of any and all situations? That's not a question I can answer for you – only you can answer that question.

In **Isaiah 61** God gives each of us a hope as He lays out His plans for every one of His children:

- He says that he will **comfort** all who **mourn**
- Instead of hearts that are steeped in **grief** He will exchange that for a **crown of beauty**
- Instead of **mourning** God promises to replace it with **gladness**
- Instead of living with a **spirit of despair** God promises to replace it with a **garment of praise**.
- And he says the ultimate result of this is that we will each be like an **oak of righteousness** that grows up big and tall and declares God's goodness and splendor to everyone (that's the purpose of our lives that naturally flows out of all the "**insteads**" all of those wonderful "**exchanges**" He promises to give each of us.

So, the question I considered this week is **how** does God intend to accomplish all of this in each of our lives? How does He enter into our despair and give us hope and encouragement and lift that heavy burden off our hearts and minds that continues to keep us trapped in living and staying small. Many Christians remained trapped in their emotional hurt and pain and never even see themselves being an oak of righteousness for the display of His glory and splendor. They would more likely describe themselves as a frail small bush that's always teetering on the brink of extinction. The pain and suffering in their lives has left them trapped and preventing them from growing beyond a sickly bush.

I think there are a couple of strong indicators of God's methods in the closing words of Isaiah 61. Let me read verses 10-11.

**Isaiah 61:10-11 (NIV)** *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

*11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.*

Most of this psalm is not about what you need to do to bring about this transformation God is promising. Rather, it's mostly about what God is committing and promising to do for us. Last week I focused briefly on verse 11 and on the importance of us preparing the soil of our hearts and minds to be receptive and ready for God to do His amazing work in us. We can do that by choosing to focus on God's goodness and nearness to us vs. the world's problems. To displace feelings of despair and unforgiveness and heartache by reading the many **promises** in the Bible God gives to us or by entering into times of **praise and worship daily** or by spending times in **prayer** – not just rattling off a list of requests for God to do, but just recounting to God His goodness throughout history and in your life. Thank Him for His faithfulness, even when you don't sense Him. That's what this weekly time of **communion** is intended to do for us. To allow us a time to take our focus off of the world and our problems and refocus our hearts and minds on all that Jesus lovingly gave up for each of us, in order that we might have a restored relationship with God.

**Colossians 3:13** tells us to “*forgive each other as Christ has forgiven you.*” That's a tall order. A time of communion allows us to focus on what God's forgiveness of us cost Jesus and hopefully would free us up to forgive others who have hurt us.

Our Isaiah text promises that as the soil of hearts are rich with the goodness of God, *then He will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.* A life of praise for God results as He changes our hearts as we focus on Him.

This morning I want to back up one verse to the second analogy God gives us in this text, which is an indication of how God accomplishes these great works in us. And the analogy He uses there is that of a bridegroom and a bride. And throughout Scripture the bridegroom represents Jesus and the bride is you and me. Now, men, I'm sure it can be a bit of challenge to your manhood to attempt to picture yourself as a bride, but stick with me for a couple of minutes as I attempt to explain this analogy.

Here's exactly what it says in our text:

**Isaiah 61:10 (NIV)** *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

Why is Isaiah rejoicing greatly? Because of the difference God is has made, is currently making and has promised to continue to make in his life and in your life and my life as well. This is so important to grasp. Praise isn't done in order to get God to do something for me. Praise and rejoicing greatly flows naturally out of what God is already doing in your life. In the culture in which he was writing, it was a very male dominated culture. There wasn't an open dating environment where women, as well as men, would ask someone out on a date or even to marry them. It was only the man who would instigate such an ask. Similarly, God has always taken the initiative to reach out to you and draw you into a relationship with Himself. God is not sitting on His hands waiting for you to reach out to Him, He already beat everyone of us to the first move.

**1 John 4:10 (NIV)** *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Christ's death on the cross in 33 A.D. was because God loves you and paid the penalty for your many sins so that you could have a right relationship with Him. He needed to deal with your sins because you and I can't, we're incapable.

But we can even go earlier than 33A.D. to show God's intense and unending love for you.

**Ephesians 1:4-5 (NIV)** *For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—*

This passage takes us back before God even created this world. And it says that God looked down through all of history and saw you one day being born and chose you to be His. And the whole rest of the Bible unfolds His plan to bring that to happen.

Let me give you one more verse which further emphasizes God's previous work in bringing you into a right relationship with Himself.

Jesus said, *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them,"* John 6:44 (NIV)

So, you thought you developed an interest in God, or you thought it was your idea to start attending church or reading your Bible. This passage seems to indicate that it was more likely your response to God reaching out to you and prompting your mind and heart.

**Back to our bridegroom analogy** in **Isaiah 61**. God loves you and has been reaching out to you to attract you to Himself because He wants to enter into a lifelong relationship with you. Not just for this life but for all of eternity. He's done all of the drawing and now it's up to you to respond. It's similar to a man asking the woman he's dating if she'll marry him. And God is much more clearer on his intentions in His ask than some of us men are. When I tried to ask Connie to marry me I wasn't super clear. I asked her what she was doing the rest of her life and she began to tell me her plans. God isn't fuzzy on His intentions. He wants each and every one of you to accept His love for you by accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, signify that through baptism and then allow Him to love on you forever and enjoy that relationship.

I've performed lots of weddings over the years and one of the most special moments is when I ask the bride and groom to turn and face each other, to hold hands, to look into each others eyes and repeat their vows and promises. At that moment there could be no one else in the room. Their eyes and minds and hearts are focused solely on each other. That's the power of this analogy of us being the bride and Christ being the bridegroom. Our focus is to be upon Him. And in that culture the bride would rarely go out and get a job after they were married. It was the husband who went to work and provided for his bride and made her feel more and more blessed and beautiful by continually showing his love for her. Our passage says that God has *"clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness."* As a result of Jesus' death on the cross, he offers to take your dirty rags of sin and replace them with His new robes of salvation and righteousness. In other words, Jesus commits to making you more and more beautiful, more and more like Him every day.

So, there's both the initial moment when you accept Jesus Christ and your sins are washed away but then there's the daily transformation where you become more and more like Jesus in your thoughts and actions and motivations. After you accept Christ and step out of the baptistery and begin walking your new life, your attraction to sin doesn't automatically go away – as much as we'd like it to. But God is constantly doing His wonderful work inside of us to prepare us for a life of eternity spent with Him by teaching us what it's like to live like Jesus. Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, God is constantly trying to change us from the inside out. Our part in all of this is to let Him do it. To put ourselves in such a place that God can continue His amazing work of transformation.

It says in Scripture that God gives to all his children who've accepted His Son, a new mind and a new heart. When we commit our lives to follow Jesus we spiritually die to our old selves and the new self is not just an improved or upgraded version of the old self. That old self was nailed to the cross of Jesus. That's the beauty and symbolism of baptism. According to **Romans 6**, when we are baptized it's creating in a very visual image of our spiritual death, burial and resurrection – similar to what Jesus went through for each of us.

And not only do we put to death our old selves and receive from God new minds and hearts, God also equips and empowers us to live this new life by giving His indwelling Spirit to live inside of

each of us and continually empower us, through grace, to live a victorious Christ centered life. And throughout the New Testament it instructs us to fight the temptation to sin by learning to walk in the Spirit. To let the Spirit lead us into this ever deepening relationship with and dependency upon God.

**Romans 8:5 (NIV)** *Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.*

I love how Paul describes this ongoing dynamic in each of our lives.

**Philippians 2:12-13 (NIV)** *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*

God has equipped you to live a victorious life in connection with Him. He's equipped you to do this through the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. And Paul recognizes God's ongoing work within each and every one of us. And recognizing God's presence and work within us ought to empower us to live every moment in awe of God's greatness and nearness and His work to make us just like Jesus as he prepares us to live in His presence in heaven forever.

So, while God has paid the penalty for your sin and empowered you to live a sin free life from this point on, you can't do it on your own. Your best path to living sin free is to make yourself fully open to the mighty work God desires to do within you. We do that by focusing our attention on Jesus constantly and thanking God for what He keeps doing in our lives and His goodness.

In light of that I've got to tell you about how God was good and kind to me this past week. It has to do with our dryer. Connie told me earlier in the week that our dryer was no longer working and that it was making a horrible noise. So, Thursday night I was finally home for the evening and so I decided I should try to figure out how to fix it. So, I went downstairs and turned it on and Connie was right. It was squealing and grinding and overall pretty scary. So, I quickly turned it off and went upstairs to try to watch instructional videos on how to fix this thing. I watched a couple of videos and then ran across one which helps you diagnose what the problem is. So, I began to watch that video. It keeps playing various noises from dryers that aren't working any longer and tells you that if your dryer is making that noise that this is the problem and here's how to fix it. I watched it a couple of times and then had Connie and Sara come over and listen to the noises and help me determine which one best matched our dryer sound. We couldn't decide so Sara went downstairs to turn it on so we could hear the noise one more time. To our astonishment, when she turned it on it sounded fine and began to work with no problems. So, since Thursday night we've been using the dryer with no problems. So, I ask you - how does that happen? How does a dryer just fix itself? My theory is that as God looked down from heaven He decided I didn't need the frustration of trying to fix the dryer and I needed rest instead. That's my theory and I've spent quite a bit of time thanking Him for His goodness ever since.

I shared that story with another individual yesterday at a camp dean's meeting and he shared how God had miraculously resolved a pretty serious conflict within the leadership at his church by putting a piece of paper stating the original doctrine of their church on his desk. Once he read it and shared it with the other elders an incredible peace rose up that they hadn't experienced for several months. God is good and is always at work in your life and mine – if we let Him work.

In 2012, John Piper hosted a conference at Bethlehem Baptist Church entitled "**Act the Miracle**". And the theme was exactly what I've been preaching on this morning. The idea that God is always striving to transform us more closely into Christ's image through the promptings and convictions and empowering grace of the Holy Spirit. Our part is recognizing what God is wanting and intending to do and let Him do it and then live everyday out of your new identity in Jesus.

I want to share the following quote from Piper: *"In any situation we can make a choice. We can choose to live back in the world and grab ahold of its temptations and false promises of security and pleasure and identity. Or we can embrace the incredible promises of God and trust in His goodness and faithfulness to walk with us through whatever saying NO to temptations means for our lives. We need to train ourselves to reach, not just for what appeals to our immediate senses but to what we know is better. Don't settle for good when you can have the best. And the best is to fully accept and embrace everything that God has for you today in training you for the future life spent with God. We need to continually embrace God's precious promises made to His children as a treasure more precious than the pleasures of the temptation in front of us. In other words, as the Holy Spirit awakens and moves through that faith in God's promise, the power of canceled sin is broken. It is dethroned. It loses its compelling force because, by the Spirit, faith embraces God's promise as more satisfying. The power of cancelled sin is broken by the power of a superior pleasure. And faith is the soul's embrace of that superior pleasure.."*

This past week I listened to a very insightful talk given by a **Sam Allberry** who is a pastor in the U.K. and a speaker for the Ravi Zacharias ministry. In this talk, Sam was sharing how at a very early age he found himself attracted to boys instead of girls. And he lived with that for many years without telling anyone. In his late 20's he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and was very serious in living his life totally for Jesus. In his study of the Scriptures he came to the conclusion that to be engaged in sexual activity outside of the structure of a marriage between a man and a woman would be against God's designs. So, he's remained abstinent all of these years. He's often asked if that's difficult to maintain a life of abstinence. His response is that there's all sorts of his desires that are not pleasing to God that he needs to crucify at the cross of Jesus every day. He lays them at the feet of Jesus and asks Jesus to take control of them. It's what Jesus demanded of his followers to take up their crosses daily and follow Him. However, to the point of is it worth it, Pastor Allberry stated, *"It's more than worth it, because the daily trade off is to continue to seek after an increasingly intimate and very personal walk with Jesus. He says, to sacrifice my walk with Jesus just wouldn't make any sense to him because it's what he wants most of all. Everything else pales in comparison to that."* I'll try to remember to send you all a link to his talk because it's one of the very best topics on this subject that I've ever heard.

So that's how God accomplishes this transformation He offers to bring to his people in Isaiah 61 and elsewhere throughout the Bible. God says give up living your life for you and let Me teach you how to live that life each and every day. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins but doesn't stop there. He continues to work the miracle of transformation inside of each and every day, if we allow Him to. I really enjoy the theology portrayed in the Apostles Creed that we recited earlier today. But my biggest issue with it is that it fails to mention this amazing work of God in us every day as He prepares us to live with Him forever. It's a daily adventure in which God is leading down the path of living the kind of life that He's always had in mind for us to live, before sin messed it all up. So, this week let God be God in your life. Let Him change you from the inside out. Let Him free you from bitterness or anger or feelings of rejection or thoughts of lust. Invite God in and give Him permission to break your various chains and then from your new found freedom you can begin to live a free and joy filled life praising and glorifying God for who He is and for what He's doing in your life. Then you can begin to claim personally the many great promises we read about in Isaiah 61.