

Prayer

We give our best to You Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour; the best of our attention so that we might truly know Your will, the best of our love so that others know we have been changed, the best of our efforts so that our witness may be strong, the best of our time so that we are not found wanting. We give our best to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You gave your life for us. ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Try praising God in all circumstances. This is part of Scripture, it is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 and has challenged people ever since it was written! It does not suggest that we try and be happy in all circumstances, rather, that we trust Him for them and mean it.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people in your local hospital.** *Pray for the managers of your local hospital; pray for them as they balance the pressures of finance and patient care.*
- *Give thanks to God for His glory and the privilege of being one of His servants.*
- *Pray for those who gather news and publish it in one form or another. Pray they will have wisdom for what is truly in the public interest.*

Meditation

Meet any anger that arises in your soul

With an intent to live by the ways of the Lord,
And a will to let love be the victor in everything.

Meet any fear that arises in your soul

With a resolute heart that grasps reality,
And knows that in Christ there is victory over Satan.

Meet any sorrow that arises in your soul

With assent to the Gospel truths you claim
And an unquenchable hope in your eternal future.

Meet any frustrations that arise in your soul

With claiming God's peace, which dispels all gloom,
And standing firm in the promises of God.

Meet the trials of life, whenever they come

With the gifts and graces of your faith in Christ,
And then you will find why the Spirit has given them!

Bible passage - Isaiah 61:10-62:9

¹⁰ I will take great delight in the LORD,
my soul will rejoice in my God;
for he has dressed me with clothes of salvation,
he has covered me with a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewellery.

¹¹ For as the earth gives rise to its growth,
and as a garden causes its seeds to sprout,

so the Lord GOD will make righteousness and praise
spring up before all the nations.

- 62:1 For Zion's sake I will not be inactive,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her righteousness shines out like brightness,
and her salvation burns like a torch.
- 2 The nations will see your righteousness,
and all the kings your glory;
and He will call you by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.
- 3 You shall become a wreath of beauty in the LORD'S hand,
and a royal crown in the hand of your God.
- 4 You will no longer be called 'Forsaken',
and your land will no longer be called 'Ruin';
but you will be called 'My Delight Is in Her',
and your land 'Married';
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land will be married.
- 5 For as a young man marries a young woman,
so your sons will marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so your God will rejoice over you.
- 6 Upon your walls, Jerusalem,
I have set watchmen;
all day long and all night long
they will never be silent.
You who call the LORD to mind,
Do not let yourselves keep quiet!
- 7 Do not give rest to him
until he sets up Jerusalem to be praised in all the earth.
- 8 The LORD has sworn by his right hand
and by his mighty arm:
Never again will I give your grain
to be food for your enemies,
and foreigners will not drink the wine
for which you have laboured;
- 9 but those who reap it shall eat it
and praise the LORD,
and those who gather it will drink it
in my holy courts.

Bible Study

Review

As with so many of these wonderful passages within Isaiah, it is not until you read them carefully and look beyond the text at some of the details, that it all comes to life. Yesterday, Isaiah treated us with a wonderful vision of the work of God's redeemed people. His words included many fascinating prophecies, all of which apply to the church of God, and yet they are not well understood. In today's passage, Isaiah firstly reports a song of delight sung by God's people (61:10,11), and this is followed in chapter 62 by further prophetic pronouncements by the Lord which pick up the themes from the song. The connection between these is why I have included 61:10,11 with this part of chapter 62 and not the rest of chapter 61. The whole passage is full of great joy and is highly expressive, and its highlight is a description of the relationship between God and His people as a beautiful and happy marriage (61:10, 62:4,5).

Those who have been redeemed and have found themselves saved by the work of the Servant, God's Redeemer, are the ones who sing this song of joy (61:10,11). The picture describes someone getting

dressed in fine clothes appropriate for religious duties. In ancient times, the priest Aaron wore specially made fine clothes placed on him by Moses at God's command (Exodus 28:1f.), and it is probable that this was in Isaiah's mind as he described the new redeemed people of God as 'priests of the Lord' and 'ministers of our God' (61:6). The clothes worn by Aaron symbolised his duty as a priest, and Isaiah describes the new garments worn by the new people of God as the 'clothes of salvation' and a 'robe of righteousness'. It is quite clear therefore that salvation and righteousness represent the priestly duties of God's people the church, and according to this prophetic song, the exercise of these duties will make the earth fruitful (61:11) again!

Isaiah continued by prophesying that God would never be inactive again, and this theme runs through the rest of our passage. In the past, God had withheld His hand from time to time, for example, before the flood whilst people sinned (Genesis 6:1f.) and whilst the people of Israel were in Egypt before Moses came (Exodus 1,2). In the new world order of the new covenant (61:8) and salvation (61:10), the Lord has promised that he will work ceaselessly so that His light might shine in the world (62:1). This, of course, means now! God may appear absent to us at times, but He is not. We think this is so because of our blindness; our Lord God is in fact working ceaselessly. This constant is described by Isaiah as like a marriage, for when He says; 'your land will be 'Married' (62:4) this means that it will be continually fruitful (see translation notes). God's ceaseless activity means that the watchmen on the city gates will have constant news (62:6), and those who do His work will constantly reap the fruit of the harvest; 'those who reap it will eat it, and those who gather it will drink it in my holy courts' (62:9). This is Isaiah's picture of the church of God and the new covenant!

This constant presence of God accounts for the change of names described in this passage, for God's people who were called 'Forsaken' and the Promised Land called 'Ruin' (62:4) will find themselves renewed! We must be careful with the imagery of marriage in this passage because on the one hand marriage describes God's relationship to His people, as here; 'as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice in you.' (62:5). On the other hand, much of the passage also describes the relationship of God's people to the church as like marriage, as in the first half of the same verse; 'for as a young man marries a young woman, so your sons will marry you.' The picture here is quite different from the picture of God marrying the church, and unless you realise this, the passage sounds decidedly strange!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The song and the themes (61:10,11)
- Activity, a new name, and a marriage (62:1-5)
- The work of God in the world (62:6-9)

Notes on the text and translation

V10 'like a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest'

The Hebrew says 'as a bridegroom adorns his head with a turban' This is a colloquial way of saying that the bridegroom puts on a fancy headdress normally used by priests.

V11 'for as the earth gives rise to its growth.'

The verb translated 'give rise' comes from the Hebrew word for 'come out', but it is written in a special form which has the meaning 'make come out'. The idea is that the earth itself has the power within it to make the seed grow; this is not just a simple picture of shoots sprouting, the sentence says more than this.

V2 'He will call you by a new name'

Most translations have 'you will be called by a new name', but this does not convey what the Hebrew gives us here, and the translation I have given is more accurate. The form of the verb indicates that the Lord will give to His people a new name, and the verb 'call you by' in Hebrew implies 'take possession' or even 'commission'. These meanings must be born in mind for any explanation of the passage.

V2 'that the mouth of the Lord will give'

There is no adequate way of saying in English what it says in the Hebrew here, which is 'what the mouth of the Lord will pierce'. The 'piercing' is a sign of ownership, as when a master pierced an awl through a slave's ear to denote ownership (Ex 21:6). When explaining the text, the Lord's giving of this new name will denote ownership, see study.

V3 'a wreath of beauty ... a royal crown'

You will be used to the translation 'a crown of beauty ... a royal diadem', however the Hebrew refers to two words for royal headdress which are very similar, and the word 'diadem' is not normally recognised by people today.

V4 'your land will be married'

In the last line of this extraordinary verse, there appears to be a simple repetition, but it is more than that. To describe the land as married in this way is to say that it will become fertile (see study)

V5 'marries a young woman'

The Hebrew word here describes a young woman living in her father's house as a virgin. Incidentally, it is the lack of the use of this word (which does imply virginity) in Isaiah 7:14 that obliges the translator not to use the word 'virgin' in Isaiah 7:14, whatever one may believe about the 'virgin' birth.

V6 'You who call the Lord to mind ...'

The Hebrew says 'You who remember the Lord', but throughout the Old Testament, the word 'remember' acts more like the English 'call to mind', and not merely the opposite of 'forget'!

V7 'until He sets up Jerusalem to be praised in all the earth'

There are some difficulties in translating the Hebrew here and making it into a simple line – as it is in the text. The Hebrew reads; 'until he sets until he makes Jerusalem a praise in the land.'

Going Deeper

Once we have understood these things, then we are in a position to reap its rich rewards; but throughout the passage there is a dynamic sense of happiness and zeal because of the deep and constant relationship between God and His people, and whichever way you look at this relationship, our text calls it a marriage! As we go deeper, we will look at the three clear sections of the text, 61:10,11, then 61:1-5 and finally 61:6-9. We will find the overlapping themes we have already identified, but there are other themes, and because of their very nature, they speak directly to God's people the church, today.

The song and the themes (61:10,11)

These two verses deserve to be made into a song to be sung by God's people! They rejoice in the task they have been given by God to be priests and ministers to the world, and each one is dressed with the clothes of salvation and righteousness! Whatever the great clothes worn by Aaron, these garments are finer! Whilst teaching at Bible College, I came across the work of an evangelist from the 1920's and 30's, who made a stir by dressing up in priestly garments designed according to the complex instructions provided in Exodus for Aaron's ordination. The entire garb was impressive, heavy and cumbersome, and covered by the great 'ephod' of the high priest, containing twelve jewels each representing the twelve tribes of Israel along with pockets for the 'Urim and Thumim' stones used (in an uncertain way) for declaring God's Word. It is reported that at the height of his evangelistic preaching he would remove the clothes and replace them with a simple shirt and cloak with the word salvation and righteousness, declaring how much better these were, and how much more functional they were for the task of winning the world for Christ! Of course, our evangelist obtained his reference for the change of clothes from this text in Isaiah, the great prophet of the Old Testament who foreshadowed the New.

The picture of marriage begins to permeate Isaiah's prophecies in this first verse (61:10) as it ends with these words; 'as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with jewellery.' This addition to the description of the garments of salvation and righteousness reminds us that this is a serious matter, as serious as a lifelong relationship and worthy of great symbolism. Imagine what it would say today if when a bridegroom came to church for marriage, he wore a clerical collar to symbolise the holy and complete sense of his vocation to be with his wife, and also his acceptance that God was at the centre of the marriage! This is indeed the equivalent of what Isaiah describes here, and we might find it shocking if it did not evidently challenge our somewhat weak ideas both about marriage and about what it means for someone to be set aside for leadership and ministry in the church. It might also suggest to us that in truth, parents are the 'high priests' of any family and therefore responsible to God, and it might also remind our leaders that though ordained, the ministry of the people of God is in fact shared and is not their exclusive property, even for the sake of good order (see 1 Cor 14:40)!

The intention of God is to see the whole of His creation become fruitful according to the potential with which it was made, and this is His declared purpose in establishing a new covenant with His redeemed people (61:8,11). The Lord's manifesto is clear; 'The Lord God will make righteousness and praise spring up before all the nations.' The translation notes (above) help us understand that the world has been made with God's power and His moral nature embedded within the very way creation works, and it only needs God's people to act in justice and worship the Lord, for the created world to respond and amplify the good news of God and

the praises of His name! In other words, when God's people do His will, they may find opposition from people and from Satan, but not from the created world.

Activity, a new name, and a marriage (62:1-5)

'I will not be inactive' say the Lord (62:1)! What a powerful and wonderful prophecy with which to begin a chapter, but it follows on directly from what has just been said; marriage, clothing, and creation are not pictures of occasional acts of God. It is the Lord's intention once the Servant has done His work, and redemption and salvation are let loose within the world, that he 'will not rest' until 'righteousness shines out like brightness ... and salvation burns like a torch (62:1). There is no mistake in our assessment that righteousness and salvation lie at the heart of God's work here! Isaiah has already explained that it was Israel's failure to be a 'light to the nations' that led to the Servant having to face the awful work necessary for redemption and salvation (49:6, 52:13-53:12).

As previous prophecies have already indicated, the Lord's new work will be done in public in front of other nations and Kings. There is no room in Isaiah's prophecies for private religion; 'the nations will see your righteousness ... and kings all your glory!' (62:2). The sheer energy of God to make His word visible in the world will drive through our personal religious likes and dislikes, and the church will always be judged by the world, and if it has no testimony to its Creator, then other people will ignore it, and rightly so. The historic work of God to which the Bible testifies is like a name change; the 'forgotten' and 'ruined' people and land of Israel will be demonstrably changed and made fit for marriage! The people of God will be called 'My delight is in her' and 'Married'.

This name change reflects God's delight in His redeemed people, and also their fruitfulness; this is because in the ancient cultures of Isaiah's day, the idea of marriage was linked not with sex and partnership so much as fruitfulness and the bearing of children (for the purposes of passing on an inheritance). It is not so long ago in the history of the church when it was the pride of all God's people to be part of His 'generations', proud of what has gone before, and deeply concerned to provide the foundations for what is to come. Indeed, many people felt that their named and specific identification through baptism (and through confirmation of their baptism) as part of the church was an essential for their salvation. It was not that people doubted God's ability to save whomsoever He would, whatever their experience of the life of the church, but that the call of God on their lives meant that it was necessary to be publicly affiliated with a church; nothing less was appropriate! Today, people squabble more over styles of baptism, and few are interested in what it means to be a 'member' of God's church!

When publicly 'married', there is no disputing the connection between God's people and their Lord. A multiplicity of pictures overlap and perhaps confuse us next (62:3f.), but their power to evoke the idea of public closeness and acceptance is obvious. At the beginning of his prophecies, Isaiah said 'Ah sinful nation, people laden with iniquity ... who have forsaken the Lord' (1:4), and he goes on to describe the ruin and desertion of Israel and Jerusalem caused by their sin (27:10f. etc.). The new names given were in fact useable Hebrew names; 'My delight is in her' is the Hebrew name 'Hephzibah' (the name of King Manasseh's mother – 2 Kings 21:1) and 'Married' is the Hebrew name 'Beulah' which is not found in the Old Testament, but is mentioned in other Hebrew scripts as a used name. The names, the pictures of wreaths and crown, and the mention of marriage itself, all serve to speak of the wonder of a close relationship with God. Yes, He thinks of us as if He was married to us!

The last theme of this section is delight. Marriage is the illustration of the delight God finds in His people, the church, and also, strangely, of the delight God's people find in the church (see verse 5 and its explanation above). Now, if this is God's will, why do we find such turmoil in the church today? Anyone would think that people were not in love with their churches and the people in them anymore; churches are no more than people! There is great maturity in recognising that as with any marriage which has its ups and downs, the deep passion aroused in those who are married happen because they love each other dearly. For this reason, people will feel deeply about what happens at church and why people do this or that. However, in a marriage there is at best openness, which is always willing to hear the other point of view and work through any problems simply because love demands that relationships are restored. That is the true spirit of our relationship with the church, and it is the true spirit of our God's relationship with us. He does not let us go because he gets angry at what we do (even though He is entitled to do this); he offers us His love and a way back to our relationship with Him, and this should be the model for all our relationships in the church.

The work of God in the world (62:6-9)

Imagine what the life of your church would be like if constant look outs were required, waiting to see what God was going to do next! This is what the prophet Isaiah sees here! The look outs are constantly making a noise, shouting out the news about what God was doing! I am reminded of the stories of Primitive Methodism and the early 'camp meetings' at places such as 'Mow Cop' in Staffordshire in the 1830's and 40's. Records tell us that the Methodist preachers hired a field, and in scenes like a small version of the Glastonbury festival, different preachers preached at different locations around the field continuously for the

day. People came and listened, first to one preacher and then another, and teams of people were on hand to assist those who fell under the influence of the Holy Spirit, doing no more or less than praying with them for however long it took for them to 'find peace' and receive the salvation of their souls. The scenes would continue all night, with a bright moon! Records of the day suggest that those involved were taken with an imperative spirit of urgency they would not 'be silent' (62:6) even when ordered by magistrates to stop!

These great historic events within the life of just one church can be echoed by others across the world, when the divine imperative to announce the message of salvation and sing the praises of God has become so strong that no human agency has been able to stand in the way. Verses 6 and 7 prophesy such work, but they do not say that this will be an occasional experience of God's people. The Lord does not rest, and we cannot rest whilst the Good News of salvation and righteousness remains to be declared to people who so desperately need it, even today. The Lord will use the methods appropriate to the people and the places for His work, and I doubt that church enquiries into new ways of being church will revive the sense of urgency amongst God's people to do His work in dynamic ways. The agent of such things is the Holy Spirit of God, as we saw a few days ago in our study of Isaiah 61:1f.

The Lord promises through Isaiah that He will not allow His people to be trampled on again and their food taken or their wine drunk by others (62:8,9). Some believe that this means God will always keep His people from the ravages of the world, whatever happens. This is true if we stay close to Him, but we should remember the salutary tale of the Old Testament people of Israel. They placed themselves into the hands of the world and married its values and its life, so it was they who broke the marriage contract, and however much the Lord loved them, he could not make His people respond to Him. Theirs was the divorce, not His.

Application

The overflowing illustrations and pictures within this prophecy are at times confusing, but the energy and drive of the vision is not. One can almost feel the power and conviction of this prophecy which points forward to the incredible energy of the first Pentecost Sunday when the church was born and people flocked to the church by the power of God's Spirit. Such things happen today, but too few know the reality of God working in such power. This great prophecy makes it clear that God's people can expect the Lord to work through them in power to bring fruit for the Kingdom of God. The marriage of the Lord with His people will always be a fruitful one!

This vigorous prophecy should make us God's expectant people. We cannot, perhaps should not, try and make things happen as if we were sufficiently skilled in the arts of sociology to successfully analyse the world ourselves and work out how the Gospel will best confront its complacencies and evil. By God's grace we may be able to travel a little along such a road, but we will not travel it fruitfully unless the Lord is our guide and takes the initiative to make us confident we are doing the right thing. We will know we are doing what the Lord requires of us as His people if the Lord and His salvation are praised (61:11, 62:7), if the work of God's people the church is held in high regard (62:3,4,5), if it is relentless and sustained by God's strength (61:11 and 62:1,6,7), and if the world recognises that God is working in power. We make a great mistake if we think that in a multi-faith society, people will not be able to distinguish the God who made the world from all other forms of religion. He has made Himself known through the endeavours of missionary work in all kinds of cultures and religious backgrounds within the history of the church. We are aware of the complexities of multi-faith society, but God is still able to sweep through any nation with the truth of His redeeming love, without upsetting the politics of the world and without offending others.

This passage of scripture should urge us on in confidence; nothing more, nothing less.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How can we be confident in the Lord's presence and remain keep happy and content in the midst of all the trials of life? Share any experiences of blessing in the midst of difficult circumstances.
2. What does the illustration of marriage reveal about God's relationship with His people? Does this speak to people today, especially those who reject marriage as a basis for long lasting relationships?
3. Why do God's people not experience continued growth and success in their endeavours? The passage suggests that praising God will help improve things, is this so?

Personal comments by author

I long for the church to recover its confidence in the things of God. For many people, too much of church life is a matter of ploughing through an agenda of problems, when this is surely not God's purpose. He loves us like a husband loves a bride! Surely this must mean something? Unfortunately, some Christians prefer to live in their worldliness and lack the will to be changed into the glory of God, and it is very difficult to persuade people to change their ways! The church of today needs to be faithful to its Lord, and the vigour of Isaiah's vision lies just around the corner!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to think about:** *Do you experience the Lord's presence, and if so, in what ways? Do you know His presence all the time, or perhaps only part of the time? The Lord is always willing to reveal more of Himself to us if we are ready ...*
- **Something to talk about:** *Discuss with a friend, preferably a non-Christian, whether the idea of 'God' enriches the world for all people. Listen carefully to what is said and argue your case for God's presence in the world.*

Final Prayer

Almighty God, teach us the wisdom of life. Make us wise enough to learn the truths we need to learn from You, so that when we meet You face to face we may have the wisdom to confess our sins before our Saviour Jesus Christ and receive His forgiveness. All praise to You, Almighty God, for Your salvation! AMEN
