

December 11, 2011

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 "The Wedding At Christmas"

¹The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

³to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

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

⁸For I the Lord love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

⁹Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

¹¹For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations. (ESV)

- Our Broken Marriage
- Hope for the Marriage
- Wedding at Christmas
- The Wedding Gifts

So FIRST, our broken marriage. The prophet Isaiah is writing this when the people are coming off a bad year. In fact, they are coming off of a whole *series* of very bad years. Year after year, things have been very bad. In fact as you go through Isaiah, you can become weary of reading *exactly why* these years have been so bad.

Israel, as a people, were to reflect God's love to the world. That is the promise that God gave to Abraham, and it was to be an everlasting covenant. In a very real way, you could say that God and Israel had a covenant – a *marriage* covenant – if you will.

Have you ever been to a wedding where some guy has so remarkably married-up – she is so wonderful, she is so much better looking than he is handsome – that everyone looks on and says, in effect, "She makes him look so much better than he really is!"?

God's covenant relationship is *very much* like that. Except he is the good-looking one, the *glorious* one. Israel is united to one who is set apart, and above all creation. He *is* the Creator. He is truth and perfection. He is *holy*.

And Israel's role in the relationship, as his betrothed, is to *be* holy as *he* is holy. She is to copy his ways – his laws and commands – so that the nations would look on in what the bible refers to as a "godly jealousy," where the watching world sees this marriage and says, "We'll have what they're having!" Where the world thinks, if only that could happen to me.

But the marriage has gone sour. It is a broken marriage. This is like marriages you may have seen – I've seen them, I've counseled some – where you scratch your head and marvel at the blinding power of sin. Do you know what I mean? I've seen multiple marriages where (and I'm picking on the guys today, but it can happen the other way around) where some Christian man leaves a woman who is so **CLEARLY** his glory – in her appearance, in her character, in her maturity as well as her spirituality and obedience – and dumps her for another woman. And then – has this happened to you? – you run into the guy a year or two later *with* the other woman you've long only heard about ... and ... you just can't understand it! He walked away from someone absolutely wonderful, not to mention the solemn, public vow he made to make his wife beautiful in character, and beautiful in feeling loved (they had it all!) ... *for this?*

Israel, at this point, *is that guy!*

What had once been glorious, is now a wreck. The nation which at one time had been blessed, had once been growing and thriving, had been a bustling nation, is now under siege. Jerusalem is surrounded by a foreign army. And the prophet Isaiah comes into this situation the way that Nathan came into David's marital situation, and says, "You are that man. And because you've walked away from your first love, because you haven't reflected the glory of the Lord, because you haven't been faithful and you've worshipped other gods, and you haven't followed his laws... things are going to get a whole lot worse before they ever get better." And that's what will happen in the chapters ahead. Israel is wiped out, Judah is scattered, Jerusalem is sacked, and even the temple – the dwelling place of God – to extend the covenant marriage metaphor – God's marital bed that he shares only with his people, is destroyed.

Now how does this happen? How does a marriage where one person so clearly marries up that it's obvious to the entire wedding party – even the groom's mother knows it! – how does that person walk away from something that good, and into a relationship that's far worse... but believing it's better?

It is the blinding power of sin, and it happens in stages. It happens over time. I don't have time to go through the facets of what the bible calls sin, but you see them in relief, you see these stages or facets in the photographic negative of verse 8: God loves justice. God loves something that is objectively right, we love what is subjectively good for us. Sin is, if you will, breaking God's standard of what should *always* be right for *everyone*, and makes it a scale that should always be weighed in our own favor.

Second, sin is breaking God's heart. God makes (v. 8) everlasting promises. His promise is always to be *for* his people. His heart is set on them. He promises to be the lover of our souls, but sin is when you start to flirt with the idea of putting yourself in the heart of other lovers... and you keep flirting with it, you develop the fantasy until you plot to do it. And then you do. Just to see what it's like, of course. We choose newness over commitment and promise. The fresh, over the everlasting.

Friends, what are you flirting with? It may not be a person, be we ARE, all of us, flirting with other lovers.

And then the next stage is that sin takes hold when guilt and desire work together. Because that new thing, that new behavior, that new love... cannot last. We feel ashamed. But we need to cover over our shame. So we find *another* love. And then the guilt sets in, and rather than repent – which only feels like more shame and guilt – we find *yet another* love. And around and around it goes.

Now that is the nature of sin, and it is in essence the history of Israel. And since Israel is a model bride – they stand in for all humanity – that is *our* history, too. Again, I don't have time to go over this. But think! Christianity is a thinking religion! Think about all of the theories for what is wrong with this world. What did Marx say was wrong with us? What did Plato say was wrong with us? What about Freud? How about Darwin? I don't care whether you love Keynes or Hayek. After the last century, with multiple world wars – tell me, are we really any closer to what really is wrong with humanity?

The bible says that the problem is sin, and it has destroyed the intimacy, joy and blessing that we could have had with our creator. *Sin* is why the marriage is broken. We have other loves.

- Second: Hope For the Marriage

This text from Isaiah is very famous, if for no other reason than this is the passage that Jesus reads in his hometown Synagogue in Nazareth one Sabbath day in Luke chapter 4. He announces the great and acceptable year of the Lord. "The year of the Lord's favor."

Now there is a background to this idea. This isn't prophetic code-speech, but rather the idea has its roots in the Old Testament idea – the ordinance – of the Year of Jubilee. It's the year – Elder Don read about it from Leviticus 25 – where God sets forth the structure of the sabbatical system. Every 7 days was a Sabbath day. Every year at the 7 month was the Sabbath month – that would be the month in which the Day of Atonement would fall on the 10th day. And then every 7 years would be the sabbatical year, when the lands were to be left fallow – no planting would go on – and the land would receive rest and you would eat from the storehouse of food. And then every 7 of 7 years, you would have the year of Jubilee, the 50th year that came at the conclusion of that 7x7 years. It was the culmination of the sacred calendar that God gave to his people, Israel.

What is Jubilee all about? In his calendar, God shows his claim on the land and on the people. He first says in Leviticus 25 that "the land" belongs to him, and for the people *not* to regard it as their own.¹ (By the way, I guess I should say that the bible has no problem with property rights. It affirms them – in this same chapter of Leviticus God talks about what to do when your brother wants to sell his property. But his point is, "this land that you live in – this land of promise that you all own, live on, buy and sell and inherit – is in a very real sense, ultimately mine," just like the money in our pockets is ours, but is ultimately God's at the same time.)

But not only does "the land" belong to God, but the *people* belong to God: He tells them, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God... For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."²

Now some of you, not too many of us, but some of you... know that this is ... confusing. Because these verses in Isaiah 61 are the foundational text for what we call today, Liberation Theology.

And yet here, we have a strange ethical and theological structure for liberation and liberty. God says, "I own the land. The people are mine. They are my servants. And that is what restores everything, the year of jubilee." It seems ironic, but it's in God's ownership of us that we are free. This is no accident.

What is freedom? What is liberty? Is it a freedom to do whatever we want? Is it the ability to do your own thing, whatever that might be? Is it the capacity to remake yourself, to be whatever you think you should be? And is liberty only to be defined in terms of rights and demands, and by things that people want for themselves?

Now, everybody, if you really press them, will admit that liberty has its limits. You've heard the old saying that "Your liberty stops where the end of my nose begins." But where are the limits to liberty? And how do you define those limits?

¹ In Lev. 5:23 God says, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me."

² Leviticus 25:38, 55

Roberto Unger, a Harvard scholar and philosopher, as well as a politician, says that the modern idea of liberty is bankrupt. Americans celebrate liberty, but they cannot define it without contradiction. Why? Because the curb on your freedom to do whatever you want, ought to be a curb that is neutral or impersonal. Obviously you can't have your liberties, your freedom, curbed at the expense of someone else's liberty – otherwise, the other person has liberty, and you don't! If liberty is going to be fair, it has to be neutral. It has to be objective.

But how do you get that impersonal arbiter of neutrality?

Well, we would usually say that we get this from the law. That a constitution gives you that objectivity – you and I would get this objective liberty from a plain reading of The Constitution because we are to be a nation of laws – governed *by* laws – and not by men.

But as Unger points out, modern relativism – that everyone wants to reconstruct or deconstruct those laws, or that after 200 years we can't know what the founders meant by those laws, or that after 200 years those laws are no longer culturally relevant – with all of those ways of thinking about the law today, the law no longer gives you any real basis for objectivity when it comes to liberty. We're free now to reinterpret the laws according to whatever policies the controlling party wants to establish.

And then what happens when you make "policy" your government? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who had some experience with this, said that when the leaders of any government make their present policy the lens by which laws are interpreted, then any action that weakens state power becomes "counter revolutionary." (repeat) And Solzhenitsyn said that if you establish that principle, then here is what you get: Here is a poor guy who is sitting in a concentration camp. He's been beaten. He's starving. He's working from the early morning to late at night. And now he can't get himself out of bed in the morning – his body just can't do it any longer. What happens to him? He's taken out and shot. What's his crime? He's a counter-revolutionary. What law did he break? He's not advancing the laws of the state. He won't work *for* the state, so he is a criminal because he's working *against* the state.

Now you say, c'mon, we're a long way from the gulag. But the interpretation of our laws has only gotten looser, more flexible. And as Unger says, on what account *CAN* we give a basis for liberty? What *IS* the arbiter that determines whether we are really free? You see where we're going – how can you have an intimacy and commitment... and yet have freedom at the same time?

Is this, for you students, why you want a relationship with someone, but at the same time you are fearful of commitment? And spiritually, for all of us, how many here want a relationship with God, want intimacy with him... but are afraid we'll lose the freedom to do whatever we want?

Throughout the Old Testament, it is God's ownership, it's God's Lordship, it's God's sovereignty over all creation, that is the *basis* for his justice and the liberty and the liberation of his people. "It's because you are mine," God says, "that you are not free to oppress your brother, your sister, or the visitor. And on top of that, I will give you the year of Jubilee. The year of Jubilee will point you to what I mean by liberty."

Now, how does the year of Jubilee do this? The law that said that when that year came, everyone who was an indentured servant was set free, all debts were cancelled, everyone went back to his own inheritance, the slate was wiped clean, and everyone got a new start.

Now think about that. How helpful would that be for some of you? It's basically a once in a lifetime event, but an awfully gracious one! And why did God do this? Because WE are his people. Nothing was going to destroy his kingly, covenant promise to his people: "*I am your God and you will be my people.*" He designed it so that the family's inheritance would be maintained, everyone was to always have his own lot in Israel, which even the sins of men would not take away. He wanted you to know that you never had to go off somewhere else to literally "find your own lot in life." No, your "lot," figuratively and literally, was bound up in him and his promises.

Think about that. You have been sold into slavery, your family is sold into bondage because you owe some money... wouldn't you look forward to that year of Jubilee? And then on the Day of Atonement, when the priests blow the trumpet, announcing that atonement has been made, and the year of Jubilee begins... Imagine how you would feel! A radical, deep, spiritual cleansing, the ledger wiped clean, and you can go back home to rest in a truly clean slate. What a beautiful picture of how the Lord cares for the poor, the oppressed, the sinner. What a beautiful picture of the liberation God wants for his people. It's a liberation that is a restoration. A restoration of everything that had been lost. What a beautiful foreshadow of our freedom in Jesus Christ!

Friends, that is what gives this marriage hope. This is how all that is wrong with this world will be overturned. Redeemed. Restored. And by the way, this is how those of you who are struggling with earthly marriage will have your marriages restored: It's when God is central, sovereign and supreme in your life. In this world. The marriage breaks up when YOU want to be your own master, your own standard, your own lord and savior. Redemption comes when God is at the center.

- This takes us to point 3: The Wedding at Christmas.

Isaiah picks up this theme of the Jubilee. God is going to send someone who will announce this year of Jubilee. Now Isaiah has been building up to just who this person will be. At one point, the person is a counselor. At another place, he is a king. Still later, he is described as a servant. Here, things are heightened all the more: First, God's spirit would be on this mystery man, and then second, his anointing would also be upon him.

Now it's nothing today to hear a Christian lump together those two ideas – the anointing of the Spirit – but at this point, that combination has only happened once before – when David was anointed by Samuel, and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him.

Walter Brueggemann says that just as David was a "massive newness in Israel," so this person is all the more. And on top of that, this mystery man is speaking in his own voice. "The Spirit of the Lord God is *upon me*," "the Lord has *anointed me*," "he has *sent me* to bind up the brokenhearted..."

And then look what he brings, in verse 3: "a beautiful headdress *instead* of ashes, the oil of gladness *instead* of mourning, the garment of praise *instead* of a faint spirit."

Well that's all great. That sounds good, doesn't it? But this would be a hideous wedding. This would be like going to the wedding of perhaps your very best friend. Someone you cared deeply about – the best person you can imagine this side of heaven. And you find out they're marrying a serial adulterer. All you want to do is stop this marriage.

But this bridegroom is different. He seems to be able to do for his beloved what they cannot do for themselves – to make his beloved as glorious as he is glorious, to behave as he does.

Many years after Isaiah wrote this, after he had been anointed by the Spirit himself in power, and then went out into the wilderness to subject himself to the temptations of his bride, to identify with his bride, Jesus got up one Sabbath in his hometown synagogue and preached these very words from Isaiah 61. He proclaims the year of Jubilee, and says "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and sits down. A better way to say it is that Jesus stands up, and as he speaks the words, *they happen*. For the first time. Now. Fulfilled. "I've done it. This is the truth that sets you free."

Now this "wedding" – I hope you're tracking with this analogy, because it's one found in the text itself – but this wedding had immediate problems like so many marriages do. Because it's one thing for a spouse to promise and proclaim love and faithfulness on a wedding day. It's another thing entirely to live it out.

And you see, these folks in the synagogue that day were not so interested in what would be fulfilled in their ears, but they were looking for fulfillment in their eyes. They wanted to see signs, wonders and miracles. "You say you're going to open the eyes of the blind and make the lame walk. You *say* liberty is fulfilled; let's *see* it." And no matter what he did, no matter what he showed them – he did bring good news to the poor, he did make the deaf hear, and the lame walk and the blind see – it was never enough. And remember: this is the beginning of Jesus' ministry – and what do they do after his first sermon? They want to throw him off a cliff! Because he didn't join up with the freedom fighters. He didn't drive out the Romans. He didn't begin a resistance movement. And so, how can you set people free from oppression if you don't give them powerful examples? Even John the Baptist was confused. Messiah was going to lay the axe to the root of wickedness. How about starting with Herod? And for Pete's sake, John *himself* was captive, in prison. "If you're going to set the captives free," John thought, "Um, why not start with me? I should be 'exhibit A' for what you will do. I saw myself as your forerunner that day you were baptized. Let's go! Or should we look for someone else...?"

It all comes down to this question about Jesus: Can you BE a liberator, if you're not bringing liberation? Or to put it perhaps as starkly as we can, "Preaching good news to the poor and proclaiming liberty to the captives is all well and good. But talk is cheap. Where is the deliverance of which you preach?"

But Jesus says, "Today this Scripture *has been* fulfilled in your hearing." And this takes us to our last point.

- The Wedding Gifts

The wedding gifts. Christmas is indeed the start of a romance that leads up to a wedding. Let me show you quickly by showing you three gifts that Jesus gives as the fulfillment of this prophecy:

The first gift is patience. Did you notice where Jesus stopped in his reading from Isaiah 61? It was on purpose! "The Father has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Stop.

Friends, Jesus is a very patient king. As a prophet, he is here to proclaim all of what Isaiah had to say, because you see, it was all about him. And as a priest, the sacrifice of himself will create peace. But as a king, he must be patient. Because if he really came to open up the prisons, bind up the brokenhearted, and comfort those who mourn... AND bring the Day of Vengeance ... what would happen? Even John knew what would happen. How can you bring the deliverance of the poor without settling up with *the oppressors* of the poor? But Jesus stops time.

Friends, the Lord of Glory is the Prince of Peace. And he as stopped – he is pausing to have the gospel of forgiveness preached now – so that you can repent now of your sin, and never know the Day of Vengeance.

As Ed Clowney once said, "Jesus came not first to wield the sword of judgment, but to bear the thrust of judgment in his side. Jesus came not only as a king, but as Isaiah told us elsewhere, as a suffering servant."

That is the first gift. Jesus comes with the patience of a suffering servant.

The second gift is the gift of grace. We spoke earlier about the jubilee – that the announcement of that year, the commencing of all of that liberation, came when the trumpet blew on the Day of Atonement. The suffering, you see, of the servant had a point. His suffering was to put to death the enemy of our souls. And it is on the cross that true jubilee, true liberation, comes.

Look, I know that everyone here is concerned about the liberties we have as a nation. Everyone has a set of things from which they would like to see our culture be free. But it is always – have you noticed – a freedom *from* something. And have you noticed how these "liberations" somehow, always cause divisions? We have gay theology (which implies that there has up until now just been straight theology). Division. We have feminist theology (which presupposes that there has until recently been a paternalistic, misogynistic theology). Division. We have emergent theology vs. traditional. Liberation theology of any kind says that God's purpose was simply to free you up to be you.

But God's liberation is a freedom *for*. It is a freedom for worship, and that worship of God brings us together. The people were not brought out of slavery merely to be out from bondage, but so that they could be assembled together for worship of God. They were made free to be brought *into* God's presence!

And at the cross of Calvary, on that Day of Atonement, where Christ atones for your sin, only on that day are you made truly free from the ultimate enemies of your soul, sin and death. Jesus himself is true liberty. He has come not merely to make you free from sin, but so that you are free to be united to him. He has come for you like the husband comes for his bride. True unity, true oneness. You were made for him.

The last gift: Clothed in Righteousness. Intimacy with God scares some of us. But look at v. 10: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

Friends, God wants us to share an intimate relationship with himself in which he will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

You know, in ancient times the week leading up to the consummation of the marriage was a time of celebration, with the men celebrating in one area and the women in another. On the day of the wedding, the bride was led to her groom's home dressed in a gown that he had provided for her weeks before. There, another round of feasting occurred before the bride and groom went to the wedding chamber.

The church is now in that week of celebration. God through his Son, Jesus, has sent to us a "garment of praise," a dress that will have all the onlookers uttering "oohs" and "ahs" as we walk through the streets to go to his house. See, you don't go to the Groom clothed in the rags of your own failures – where if God really knew you, and saw you as you were, well, how could he love you? No, He has clothed you with garments of salvation and arrayed you in a robe of *his* righteousness.

God has been in the clothing business since He first clothed Adam and Eve in the garden. The robe of righteousness that Isaiah sings over was purchased at Calvary by the One who wore rags at His birth and hung naked on a cross while soldiers threw dice for his robe. Christ endured the shame of our sin in order to cover us with His righteousness. God is saying. "I've got you covered." Don't be ashamed. Don't hide. Hold your head up high. You're covered with Christ. You are well dressed in the sight of the Lord. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ" (Gal 3:27). You wear Christ. It's His gift. Not stylish by this world's standards of fashion, but perfect by God's standards of the Law.

Jesus is the bride groom who will never let you look foolish in fig leaves of your own righteousness, but dresses you in his spotless, perfect obedience, His suffering and death, His resurrection and glory.

Put on Jesus Christ in faith, and enjoy your deliverance in and to Him

Let's Pray