

YOUR GOD WILL REJOICE OVER YOU!

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he sent the eleven disciples who had followed him throughout his ministry to preach salvation in His Name to the rest of mankind. *“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* This came to be called the Great Commission and the men who received it His “apostles” after the Greek word “αποστολος”—which referred to someone who is sent out to carry a message. In the case of Jesus’ apostles, the message was the Word of God.

Over the next four decades, the apostles—along with Luke—put to writing the record of Jesus’ words and life in what we call the *New Testament*. Jesus had told them that in the *Torah*, the *Old Testament*, there were many promises and prophecies about him, so the apostles diligently searched through it for every reference to Jesus they could find. The *Book of Isaiah*, in particular, contained a wealth of information about Jesus—where and how he would be born, where he would grow up, the message he would bring, how he would die on a cross, what that would accomplish, where he would be buried, how he would rise from the dead and what that would mean for mankind. All of these prophecies had been uttered over seven centuries before Jesus was born.

Now among his other prophecies, Isaiah described what Jesus would do when He came in three rather striking—and unusual—ways. First, he said, Jesus would give those who followed him “garments of salvation” and “robes of righteousness” to wear. Second, He would betroth himself to them; that is, he would come to them as a bridegroom comes to his bride. Third, he would plant seeds of righteousness in their hearts which would sprout and bring praise to God from all the peoples on earth. Now Jesus had told His disciples that all the *Old Testament* Scriptures were God’s Word, so the Apostles used these same figures of speech as they wrote down the books of the New Testament to describe Jesus and the salvation he had brought. And if we look at them carefully, they have something to teach us about our relationship with God, the work He has done in us, and the work he has sent us to do. Amazingly, all three figures of speech appear in today’s Old Testament lesson.

Isaiah 61:10-11

“I greatly delight 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 righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 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.”

First, what does it mean to say that God has “...clothed me with garments of salvation” and “a robe of righteousness...”

Do you recall the story of the prodigal son? The story about a young man who asks his father to give him his inheritance before his father has died and then, after he has received

it, runs off and squanders it all on reckless living? When he finds himself destitute, he decides to return home and work his way back into his father's good graces. But when his father sees his son coming, he rushes out to meet him, embraces him and gives him his very best robe to wear to welcome him home. So, Jesus says, will our heavenly Father give a robe of righteousness to all those who return home to Him.

Paul takes up this idea in his letter to the church at Rome. He writes: *"Put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Clothe yourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ."* Again in *Galatians* he writes: *"All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ."* (Gal. 3:26) And in the *Book of Revelation*, when John is shown all the saints in heaven, they are dressed in *"long white robes."* Being clothed with Jesus' righteousness is simply God's way of saying that when Jesus went to the cross, He took our sins upon himself and gave us His righteousness to wear like a beautiful garment so that when God looks at us he sees only the purity, the innocence, the beauty and the perfection of Jesus Himself. We are "clothed" with Christ or, as Paul puts it elsewhere, we are "hidden in Christ."

Our sins are twisted into a crown of thorns and placed on Jesus' head. They are woven into a purple robe of mockery and hung on Jesus' shoulders while His righteousness is spun into a shimmering, seamless gown and placed over us to hide our sins. This is where the custom arose of placing a white "Christening gown" on a baby when the baby was baptized. The gown symbolized the new purity and innocence with which the child was clothed after he had passed through the cleansing waters of baptism. So, Isaiah writes, *"...he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness."*

The second way salvation is described is in terms of a marriage covenant. Jesus takes the church, the body of believers, as his bride. Now this image has to be understood in light of its *Old Testament* background. Throughout the *Old Testament*, God refers to himself as a husband to Israel—as his wife. But Israel was an adulterous wife. Adulterous, because the Israelites were always "chasing after" other gods—foreign gods, pagan gods—and committing spiritual adultery with them by worshipping them and looking to them for blessings rather than to God, her husband. Through Hosea the prophet, God declares: *"I will punish [Israel] for the days she burned incense to the baals; she decked herself with rings and jewelry and went after her lovers, but me she forgot."* Through Ezekiel, he cries out: *"You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!"*

Yet in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness and abandonment of her husband, God promises that one day he will take her back as his bride. He says: *"I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in faithfulness and you will acknowledge the Lord."* And so when God assumes human flesh and comes as Jesus Christ, He calls Himself *"the bridegroom"* and the Church, the new Israel, *"His bride."* And when the church triumphant is revealed to John in the *Book of Revelation* she is described as *"a bride adorned for her husband"* and heaven is the *"wedding feast of the Lamb."* Just as a bridegroom wants to have an intimate relationship with his bride, so Jesus Christ wants to have an intimate relationship with his people and be close to them every step of their journey. Through Isaiah, God describes his longing for his people: *"As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."*

Finally, after He has bestowed a beautiful garment of righteousness on His people and betrothed Himself to them, God instills a living, active righteousness in them. In addition to their outward adornment, the “garment of salvation” that God has bestowed upon them, He will also plant seeds of righteousness in their hearts that will sprout and grow into vigorous, fruit-producing trees. Jesus says, *“If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit,”* and *“I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”* Jesus describes the faith which receives God’s righteousness as a *“...tiny mustard seed which grows into a great bush which provides shelter for all the birds of the air.”*

A saint doesn’t remain merely “passively righteous” before God. In fact, there is no such thing as “passive righteousness.” God works active righteousness in each and every one of His saints—a love and concern for one’s neighbor which is the fruit of the seed He planted in their hearts. This is why James says that faith and deeds go together: faith is an active, growing, fruit-producing organism that God has planted in us which he waters and grows through our worship and prayers and Bible study and fellowship with other believers. Our faith in God comes alive in serving our neighbor.

It’s important to remember, however, that a seedling grows slowly into a tree. You can’t see it change from day to day or week to week, or even from year to year. But one day it stands there, a beautiful tree, laden with fruit. And so it will be with you. *“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.”*

Like an acorn that contains the blueprint for a fully-grown oak tree, Isaiah’s figures of speech contain the blueprint of how the gift of salvation works itself out in our lives. As Paul writes: *“Work out your salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”* Adorned with a robe of righteousness, God takes us to be His beloved bride and plants the seed of a new nature in us—a nature that grows in faith and hope and love. And even though we continue to be deeply flawed people, God rejoices over us because when he looks down upon us, he sees the work which he has begun in us, and that work is beautiful! *“For he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Isn’t it remarkable that God should rejoice over us? And shouldn’t we rejoice as well? Amen.