

Isaiah 62:1-5

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
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As the Bridegroom Rejoices over the Bride

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 62: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch."

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. Redemption for the Forsaken and Desolate

In the Lord's plan for a perfect world, there would never be a situation like this. Look back for a moment: He created Adam from the dust of the earth and promptly declared, "It is not good for man to be alone." So He put Adam into a deep sleep and created Eve out one of the ribs of his side. He gave them to one another, and gave to them the privilege of being the means by which He'd bring more life into the world. He could have kept on creating men and women out of dust and ribs if He wanted to; but He opted for a different plan instead.

So in this perfect world, there would be perfect happiness and perfect companionship. One imagines that an equal number of baby boys and girls would be born so that there was truly someone for everyone; and so no one would be alone, and all people would be the people of God—fruitful and multiplying, working hard in service and love to one another.

We're far from Eden, though. Perfect happiness is beyond our grasp, and even solid marriages can be difficult to find. Along the way, you'll find a lot of people who are alone—and you'll find a lot of people who are terribly lonely.

Isaiah 62 paints the picture of one such individual, and it's a heartbreaking one. It's the picture of a lonely, grieving young woman. The brush-strokes are deft and few, but we can fill in a lot of what's missing. Imagine a maiden, young and beautiful, who has reached her young adult years and has dreams of what's to come. She's met the perfect man, and she dreams about the future. She's got the diary with her ideas for her perfect wedding day so that everything is going to be just right. She's imagining the house they'll have and how she'll change this and that to make it their home. She so looks forward to their life together. She looks forward to the holy vocations of being a wife and a mother. It's a storybook start, and she very much dreams that they'll live happily ever after.

But something has happened along the way: now, she is described as alone, forsaken and desolate. There is no happy life or love. There is no husband, no companionship, no children. Alone, forsaken, desolate. What has happened? The picture leaves room for us to fill in the blanks once more, but you know how this story goes. Perhaps the perfect guy wasn't perfect after all. Perhaps he was lying through his teeth the whole time in order to get what he wanted; and once he got what he wanted, he had no more use for her. Perhaps he *was* the perfect guy; but somewhere along the way, she doubted his love and got distracted by another. And because of her doubts and distrust, she gave herself to another and betrayed the trust of the one she loved. Whichever it might be, now she's alone. She's alone with guilt and shame. One of the most bitter parts of the curse of sin is the hindsight and what-might-have-been; to think how good things would have been if you'd only done something different. Left alone with only yourself to blame, you get to know "forsaken," "desolate" and "alone."

When the Lord paints this picture in Isaiah 62, He doesn't have an individual woman in mind. He's thinking of His people, Israel. Way back at the time of Abraham, He called them to be His own. He brought them out of Egypt. He compared Himself as their bridegroom and called His people Zion, called them His bride. He promised always to be faithful, to provide for them and to keep them safe. But they were not faithful to Him. Time and time again, they turned to other gods. Time and time again, they ran to idols that promised some sort of forbidden pleasure. The Lord pursued them, called them back, repeated His faithfulness and love to them again and again. But they would not have Him. They wanted another instead.

So at the time of this Old Testament passage, the Lord's bride is alone. She sits and weeps in Babylon, a captive in a foreign nation far from the home she used to know. The so-called perfect husbands like "Baal" have proved to be worthless gods who took everything and gave back nothing. There is no comfort there. The perfect Bridegroom, God Himself, is the one whom she has spurned to go after others. She is forsaken because her idols betrayed her. She is defiled because she gave herself up to impurity, and then she was abused by others. She is desolate because she has abandoned the Lord who promised love, life and fidelity forever. Where she longs to hear tender words, there is only silence.

Oh, what might have been. But now there is loneliness, desolation and silence: for after making such a tragic mess of things, what else can she do? It is too late to be pure and faithful. It is too late for her to redeem herself.

Indeed, there is no hope *in* her. But there is hope *for* her: the Lord, her bridegroom, is still faithful. And because this is His bride, He will speak and He will redeem.

He declares, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give."

"The nations shall see your righteousness," declares God: but what righteousness is there to see in the faithless bride? Answer: the righteousness that the Bridegroom gives to her, because He is going to redeem her. But won't she then just be the pitied, used girl that He's dressed up in better clothes to hide who she's made herself to be? No. This is not cosmetic, not just a makeover. It's not rehabilitation or merely reformation. It's redemption.

This is the Lord's plan to redeem His bride, His people: He becomes flesh and takes their place. He takes their sins upon Himself, their guilt and their shame. Where they are adulterers, He takes the guilt of their adultery on Himself. Where they are faithless, He carries that, too. Where they have worshiped idols, He bears that sin as well. He bears all their sins to the cross. At the cross, God the Father says to Christ, the crucified Bridegroom: "I see that you bear the sin, the guilt and the shame. I see on You adultery, infidelity, idolatry and every last sin, stain and filth that I despise. And because I condemn sin and sinners, I condemn You." This is not blasphemy. This is the Gospel: as 2 Corinthians 5:21 declares, "For our sake [God] made Him to be sin [*to be sin!*] who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." That is the righteousness of the people of God, the Bride of Christ. That is what the Lord means when He declares of His bride, "The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory." Her sin isn't just covered up and out of sight. It's gone. When the Lord looks upon His bride, He doesn't see a beautiful woman who used to be an adulteress. He doesn't see the sinful past, because He became that sin to get rid of it. So He calls His bride "a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God:" not a crown of scrap iron painted over to look presentable, but of great worth and purity through and through. He declares that His bride will no longer be called "forsaken" or "desolate," because she is neither. Instead, the Lord calls her "My Delight is in Her." He calls her "Married." And He gives His faithful Word: "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

II. For the Church and Individual Christians

Dear friends, God rejoices over you. He would not leave you desolate and forsaken, for He has redeemed you.

What a passage this is, both for the Church as a whole and for each individual Christian! First, though, the temptation: because the Lord desires that you be a member of His Church, His pure and undefiled bride, Satan will naturally work hard to leave you defiled, desolate and forsaken. His methods are predictable, though there's an endless variation to how he carries out his plans. For one, he will send plenty of evil people your way in order to use you, and to rob you of whatever treasure you hold dear—be it freedom, virtue, integrity, money, reputation, whatever. Such people may befriend you first, and the evil one likes this variation because it only makes the betrayal worse when it happens. Even if you're an innocent party—and there's a good chance you're not, the devil's goal is to leave you feeling so shamed and used up that you'd not even think to call upon the Lord for help, that you'd only see Him as the One who used to love you, but doesn't anymore.

For another, the devil will tempt you, too. There are things about you that you treasure, good gifts of God whose worth you especially appreciate: and again, that might be freedom, virtue, integrity, money, reputation, whatever. The devil will tempt you to turn these into idols, to use them in service to you rather than the Lord. But sooner or later, when you use these things in service to you rather than the Lord, you *sacrifice* them in service to you. At that point, what you thought gave you worth is gone, because you sold it. At that point, the devil's goal is to leave you feeling so guilty and used up that you'd not even think to call upon the Lord for help.

And in either case, he'd rather have you despair, or try to get back what you lost by yourself, or cast the blame on others for your misery so that you can at least pull some shreds of pride together.

This is a warning for the Church, the bride of Christ, in total. There will always be the temptation to place value in the wrong things—the size and growth and wealth of a congregation or church body, or popularity among unbelievers of the world. This rarely comes as a conscious invitation to depart from the faith; rather, it might come with the perfectly rational-sounding argument that the world will be more likely to listen to us if they like us more, so we should give up—or at least conceal—the parts of God's Word that unbelievers don't like. But when the Church ceases to preach the whole counsel of God, it gradually loses the whole counsel of God. The book of Revelation tells us what happens to the Church when it seeks to befriend the world: in chapters 17 and 18, as it befriends the world, it gradually advocates all that the world stands for. It promotes immorality and worship of false gods. It gains a good reputation with the world, and it's admittedly far wealthier and more popular than the Church. But it is no longer the Bride of Christ: Revelation calls her the "whore of Babylon." She is an unfaithful woman who has forsaken Christ for the love of the world. In the end, the world forsakes her: it's used her up and has no more need for her, and she is desolate and alone.

We see this happening in large segments of the "church" around us today, as various church bodies forsake God's Word and embrace all sorts of false teachings, idolatry and immorality. Such places will get the world's approval for a while, but eventually even the world will have no use for them. They will be desolate, for they are not the bride of Christ. It is why, by the grace of God, we endeavor to remain faithful to His Word. The world is just one more creep trying to defile the bride of Christ, before it throws her away and moves on. Thus we repent of temptations to befriend the world's sin, and we rejoice that the Lord is faithful. The Church remains His bride, and He will present her to Himself without stain and blemish on the Last Day.

This is true also for individuals. There will be times when you are used by others, even defiled by others: perhaps you had the best of intentions, perhaps you were a willing party at the time. But few things will eat you alive inside like the guilt and shame that come with knowing you've lost something

that you can't get back. That is when you know the meaning of "forsaken," the significance of "desolate." You will be tempted to cast about and blame others so that you can pawn the guilt and shame onto them; but that does not make you righteous. You'll be tempted to such bitterness of yourself that you refuse to see that God could ever see you differently than you do; and that is the devil's whisper to lead you to despair.

But instead of the devil's whisper, remember this. For you, the Lord does not keep silent. He will not be quiet as you waste away. Though you feel the bitterness of sin and shame, He declares that He has already borne your sin to the cross. Whatever sinful name you call yourself, He has already been called the same at Calvary. Before God, your sin is gone. Before God, you are righteous for the sake of Jesus. The world will say different: it will still point and snicker and gossip and text and try to make you desolate again. But you have God's promise that He sees you as righteous; and that furthermore He promises "The nations shall see your righteousness and all the kings your glory." On the Last Day, all the world will say, "Jesus Christ is Lord;" and then they will also see the truth that you are righteous for Jesus' sake.

And because you are righteous for Jesus' sake, you are a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. Your conscience may still accuse you and say you're forsaken, but Christ says, "You shall no more be termed Forsaken. My delight is in you. I am the Bridegroom," says Christ, "and you are My bride. I delight in you. And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so I rejoice over you."

For your sake, the Lord is not silent. He continues to declare His delight in you, His joy over you. That is why you hear His Word, even when you can't stand yourself, because there the Lord proclaims His faithfulness, His redemption, His love for you. That is why you run to His Supper for forgiveness, because there is your Bridegroom, present to save. The time will come when sorrow and sighing will flee away—on the Last Day, at the marriage feast of the Lamb. Until then, the Lord is not silent. He will not be quiet. He says, "I delight in you, for I have redeemed you. I rejoice over you, because you are righteous and holy in My sight: because you are forgiven for all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen