

**Isaiah 61:10-62:3** *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. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>1</sup>For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her vindication shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch. <sup>2</sup>The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow. <sup>3</sup>You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

You know what this week means, don't you? It's back to the grind of normal life. With Christmas Day and New Year's Day being in the middle of the week, most of us didn't have whole work weeks the last two weeks. Even if you went into work, the pace was probably a bit slower than normal. Many of you may have taken some extra days off to extend your break. Many of your co-workers saved their vacation time for this time of year so there probably weren't that many people around the office. It was quieter and more relaxed than normal. Some of you went on vacation and traveled for the holidays. It's been a slower paced, relaxed schedule these past two weeks. But all of that ends tomorrow. School starts back up this week so that means its back to the regular routine. Vacations are over and the push for the new year begins with new quotas to meet and new deadlines to reach. In layman's terms we might say: the party is over, it's time to get back to work.

But as we gather together in God's house today and focus our attention on God's Word, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that for us as God's people: ***The Party Isn't Over***. It's easy for this time of year to feel a little bit of a let down. Christmas already seems so far in the past. The lights and trees have been taken down. The decorations have been put away. Our Christmas celebration may not even appear as a speck in the rearview mirror. But the true joy of Christmas doesn't go away. If the holidays for us were only about the time off work and the glitz and glamour of the season, then there would be a reason for let down. But at Christmas, God allowed our sin-darkened eyes to see once again His light and glory in Jesus. Our eyes saw on the pages of scripture the glory and righteousness of the unseen God in sending his Son to this earth to be our Savior. The joy that comes from this doesn't fade away when the lights and trees get put into the boxes. It is a joy that stays with us throughout the year and is ours every single day, despite what we face on this earth. Let's celebrate as we listen to Isaiah proclaim to us: ***The Party Isn't Over***.

This concept of joy despite the troubles we face may be difficult for us. We sang "Joy to the World" at Christmas, but not much in our world has changed because of Christmas. And while we sang "Joy to the World", on the outside we might not have a lot to be joyful about. The troubles we face didn't take a break during the holidays. In fact, they may have intensified with the added stress of the season. The debt probably didn't get any smaller over the holidays. It may have grown with the Christmas gifts you wanted to buy but didn't have the money to do so. The pains we thought we could subdue with brightly colored packages and having the family gather together are back—and they hurt as much as they did in November: old grudges, relationship problems, a friend stabbed you in the back, disputes with your neighbors. Rather than rested and relaxed, we are still weary and worn out. Our nerves are frayed. We snap at loved ones with tongues so sharp they could cut through steel. It seems that whatever peace on earth and goodwill toward our fellow humans was here was packed up in boxes and put back on the shelf for the year and we're back to gossip from malicious tongues, profanity soiling our lips, backbiting and bickering from those closest to us. Where could there possibly be joy in any of this? Why didn't the joy of the season last that long?

When Isaiah spoke these words to Israel, they were in similarly difficult times. Idolatry and immorality were running rampant. People were selfish and looking out for themselves. As Isaiah with God's help looked into the future, he saw captivity, ruin, and destruction. Gloom and despair reigned. He spent the first 39 chapters of his prophecy proclaiming the destruction God was going to send to the land because of their refusal to repent of their sins and return to the Lord. But then in chapter 40, Isaiah turned his attention to the remnant of people who had remained faithful to the Lord despite the wickedness and trouble around them. Essentially his message was: you are going to have to go through these difficult times, but don't be worried or afraid because I will be with you. Then he brought joy to their hearts by focusing their attention ahead to the one who would change all of this. The Messiah whom God promised would give them a reason to rejoice and exult and praise the Lord. He would clothe them in garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. He would make them into a crown of splendor and a royal diadem in the hands of the Lord. He would completely change their situation. They could be filled with joy despite what they were facing as they looked ahead to what the Messiah would bring them.

The word translated as rejoice could be translated, "rejoicing with rejoicing." It has the thought of going around in circles or dancing around for joy. When people are really happy, they dance around for joy. This is the thought Isaiah intends when he says, "My soul rejoices in my God." That's the kind of joy we might have felt at Christmas. Yet this is the joy we can have every single day as God's people. Every day, despite what we face, we can dance around in joy and praise of our Savior. Why is that? The picture Isaiah uses to help us understand this is that of a rags to riches story. In this text he pictures the clothes of the riches part of the story. To fully understand the beauty of this picture, it's important we look at the contrasting image of the rags first. Isaiah will say in chapter 64, "*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*" This pictures us by ourselves before God. Think of the person who has nothing but rags for clothing. They are dirty, ripped,

torn, smelly...filthy. It's hard to be around someone like that. We are repulsed not only by their look but by their smell. It is offensive. We gag and plug our noses. We do all that we can to separate ourselves from that. We want to be as far away as possible. That is how we appear before God because of our sin. Those sharp tongues which we used to snap at our loved ones which we talked about earlier—that's not just excused away because we are stressed or tired or had a poor reaction. That is sin. The gossip that we engage in, the knives we knowingly or unknowingly stick in someone's back, the profanity that soils our lips, the backbiting and bickering we engage in, the unloving speech which comes out of our mouths...all of that is filthy sin that covers us before God. This is why God would separate us from him eternally in hell...because we are filthy in sin. Here's the worst part...even the good things we try to do, our righteous acts, are nothing more than filthy rags because they come from hearts of sin and selfishness. That's not much to rejoice about. We are clothed by ourselves in embarrassing attire that is completely unacceptable before God.

What a contrast to the clothing Isaiah describes in our text: *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... You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*" This is a vivid illustration of what Jesus did for us during his time on this earth. He took all of our filthy rags on himself and dressed us up in the robe of his righteousness. God gave to us as a free gift what we could not possibly earn: he has clothed us in garments of salvation. He has completely covered us in the righteousness or perfection of Jesus. This God did for you at your baptism, when he washed away the filth of your sins and gave you brand new spiritual garments to wear. You who were so filthy and smelly and disgusting in sin are now clean and dressed in the finest of clothes. He even compares these spiritual clothes to that of a bride and groom on their wedding day. Never does a woman glow more than on her wedding day. Never does a groom look as sharp as he does on his wedding day. More than any other day, the bride and groom will put on the best of clothes and glow like no other day. This is how you look now because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He has washed your sin away and God sees nothing but holiness.

This is cause for rejoicing...Every. Single. Day. Every morning when you wake up, you put on the clean garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness. This party isn't over. It never ends! No matter what we did yesterday, we don't have to put on the filthy rags of guilt or shame because we know the forgiveness and life we have in Jesus. We don't have to hide our heads in shame before God or be embarrassed to stand before him. We do so confidently and with rejoicing because he has not left us alone to try and cover ourselves but has given us the garments of salvation and robe of his righteousness. This is what gives us ongoing joy despite what we face. Remember, there is a difference between happiness and joy. Happiness comes from outward circumstances. Those can change and with it the emotions that we feel. Joy, however, comes from the inside and can be ours no matter what the outside circumstances. Here's our joy—the troubles and sorrows we face in our world do not mean that God has left us all by ourselves. They are not signs that God is angry with us. They do not indicate that God is punishing us for things we have done. Despite whatever we are facing, we can have the joy of knowing God loves us, has forgiven us and goes with us through whatever we face. That's joy that stays with us day after day after day. That party of joy never ends!

Isaiah tells us something special about this party of joy: *"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."* God doesn't want this righteousness limited to a handful of people. He wants it to be for all people around the world. He wants it to sprout up all over the place. God's plan is to use people like you and me to share this righteousness with people who still think they can save themselves with their dirty rags of righteousness. The Lord wants the world to see what you have in Jesus and believe that this is also for them as well.

Think about how excited we are to invite people to a party we are having. We send out personal invitations through email or text or even a hand-written card. We post the event on Facebook and invite people to like your event and join you. When you are having a party and know it will be a good time, you want other people to join in the fun. You want to see them be able to enjoy the event like you will enjoy the event. You want them to come because you know it will be good for them. How much more so when you and I know the joy of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus! We don't want people to be miserable and burdened by their grief and shame. We don't want people to be comfortable in their filth or convince themselves they are clean and fine when they are filthy. We don't want them to die eternally in hell. We want them to know the salvation offered in Jesus. We want them to have the joy of knowing God's love and forgiveness. The party isn't over. It's one that goes on every day and will for the rest of eternity!

Yes, this week it's back to the grind of normal life. The festivities and fun of Christmas and New Years are past and we get back to our regular lives. Yet the joy of Christmas—the joy of seeing the glory and righteousness of the unseen God in sending his Son to this earth to be our Savior—never fades away. Every day we wake up and enter into our day dressed in the finest of clothes spiritually. What a gift God has given you! Let this be your joy and your delight even in the face of adversity. Though outwardly things might be terrible, inside we are full of joy and rejoicing because we know the salvation God has given to us and live as his people even now. What a comfort to know: The Party isn't Over. Amen.