

The Light of the Holy City of God

Isaiah 60:1-22

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

Jan. 22, 2023

In Revelation 21:1-2, the Apostle John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

This morning we are going to work through Isaiah's version of Revelation 21. The similarities between these two chapters are striking.

While Isaiah 60 can point to the return of the exiles to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the city, this chapter really looks to the New Jerusalem, God's Holy City at the end of the age.

I have a one-point sermon this morning: *God glorifies Himself by making His Holy City, the church, beautiful.* I will give you some points to help us walk through the text, but they are all the unfolding of this one point. We'll make some application along the way, but we'll make our primary application at the end.

I. Behold the Radiance of God's Holy City (Isaiah 60:1-5)

Let's begin by looking at vv. 1-2 one more time:

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord shines over you.
² For look, darkness will cover the earth,
and total darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will shine over you,
and his glory will appear over you.*

God begins His message in Isaiah 60 with a double imperative in the original Hebrew. "*Arise & shine*" are words of command. God is commanding and bringing into existence in the hearts and lives of the people what they have been unable to do—*display His glory*. Up to this point, they struggled to love the Lord and obey Him. Now, at the end, God is commanding the fullness of His glory to be displayed in His people.

St. Augustine knew that God commanded obedience and could grant in the lives of His people what He commanded. That is why we have His famous prayer.

*O love that ever burns and will never be quenched! You command obedience.
Grant what You command and command what You will.*

Next, let's see in whose hearts God is commanding obedience. I want you to notice the pronouns used in this chapter. In the original Hebrew, the pronouns "*you & your*" are feminine pronouns. These pronouns tell us that God is talking about *the church, the Bride of Christ*.

So, the thing about Isaiah 60, is that it opens with God's glory shining on His people, and then it culminates with God's glory shining on His people.

Bottom line: This chapter is about God giving Himself to His church. As God's glory rises like the sun, it drives the darkness away from His people. His promise is not only new on this particular morning¹; it is fulfilled in its ultimate sense.

Brothers and sisters, this is the destiny of God's people. It may not always feel like God's glory is shining on us in this life, but it is there in our hope and joy that He has given us.

But the fact is, we live in a dark world right now. I was listening to the news podcast "*The World and Everything In It*" on Friday. During the podcast, George Grant did his segment called "*Word Play*." In it, he said the three most popular dictionaries each chose a word as their most significant word for 2022. Here are the words:

- *Oxford Dictionary: Goblin Mode: A type of behavior that is unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations.*
- *Merriam-Webster: Gaslighting: It is the practice of grossly misleading someone for one's own advantage. It's a form of psychological manipulation that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories, and it typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence, the uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator.*
- *Collins English: Permacrisis: A word that describes "an extended period of instability and insecurity." It depicts the smothering atmosphere of unending political instability, heightening global tensions over Ukraine, Taiwan, Korea, and Yemen, climate change worries, persistent pandemics, supply chain woes, unchecked inflation, and all the accompanying cost-of-living pressures.*²

Think about it, the most defining and significant words in 2022 are words that are *dark and negative* words or, as George Grant says, *gloomy*. The darkness of our vocabulary reflects the darkness in our world.

Friends, this may be the condition of our world, but our world does not have the final word. *In the end, it is the Word of God, the gospel, that has the final word.* It is God's Word and, more specifically, the gospel that drives out the darkness. It rises with a brilliance greater than the sun, and it causes the darkness to flee.

Look in vv. 3-5 tells us that God will call His people out of the nations. The light of the gospel will be irresistible to them. It will be like Jesus calling His disciples; when they heard the gospel, they came. Listen to vv. 3-5:

³ *Nations will come to your light,
and kings to your shining brightness.*

⁴ *Raise your eyes and look around:
they all gather and come to you;
your sons will come from far away,
and your daughters on the hips of nursing mothers.*

⁵ *Then you will see and be radiant,
and your heart will tremble and rejoice,
because the riches of the sea will become yours
and the wealth of the nations will come to you.*

Verses 3-4 tell us that the light of the gospel draws God's people out of the darkness. Those who repent and believe come into the marvelous light of Christ. Then we will look and marvel at the multitude coming to faith in Jesus.

¹ Lamentations 3:23.

² <https://wng.org/podcasts/word-play-gloomy-language-1674161795>.

Then v. 5 tells us that we become part of the building of the Holy City of God. We are not bystanders; we are sharing the light of the gospel in the darkness of this world. That is why Jesus calls His people the light of the world. We are the city set on a hill.

The radiance of God's people draws those in darkness from all across the globe to its light. This is the future city of God. It is the gathering of the nations into the embrace of God's people as they are saved by the Light of the gospel. This is the future reality of the winning of the nations by the preaching of the person and work of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. All who believe will be gathered into the Holy City of God.

Our task, until that day comes, is to be a local body of Christ that faithfully preaches the gospel. That is our role.

II. Behold the Beauty of God's Holy City (Isaiah 60:6-9)

Next, vv. 6-9, continue to unpack this idea of nations coming out of the darkness, but this time we see how the gospel makes them beautiful. Listen to v. 6 & v. 9:

⁶*Caravans of camels will cover your land—
young camels of Midian and Ephah—
all of them will come from Sheba.
They will carry gold and frankincense
and proclaim the praises of the Lord . . .*

⁹*Yes, the coasts and islands will wait for me
with the ships of Tarshish in the lead,
to bring your children from far away,
their silver and gold with them,
for the honor of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you.*

Here is what is happening in these verses. Again, as the good news of the gospel is proclaimed, those trapped in darkness are drawn to the light of the gospel. People who repent and trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior are drawn out, and they begin to worship Jesus.

This language is figurative because the building material for God's Holy City is NOT brick, mortar, gold, and precious wood but people who have been redeemed. The Apostle Peter says, in 1 Peter 2:4-5, that both we are living stones in the spiritual house of God:

*As you come to him, a living stone—rejected by people but chosen and honored
by God—⁵you yourselves, as living stones, a spiritual house, are being built to
be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus
Christ.*

So, as the nations begin to worship, those from every tribe and tongue exalt the name of Jesus. In this act of redemption, God builds His Holy City, one living stone, and it is a beautiful house because these stones cry out the praises of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The application here is obvious, isn't it—worship Jesus in all of His glory. From His perfect, sinless life to His sufferings on the cross to His glorious resurrection from the dead, worship our Savior who gave His life as a ransom for our sin.

III. Behold the Wealth of God's Holy City (Isaiah 60:10-16)

Verses 10-16 tell us about how God's Holy City is not only beautiful but also filled with riches. This passage sounds like it may be referring to the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exiles return home, but this is not the case.

Verse 10 refers to *foreigners rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem*. However, v. 10 is not referring to the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon because it was not foreigners who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem; it was Jewish exiles.

Verse 10 refers to the wealth of the New Jerusalem. It is the city the Apostle John wrote about in Revelation 21. Let's listen to the Apostle John's account of the wealth of materials that built the walls of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:18, 23-25:

¹⁸ The building material of its wall was jasper, and the city was pure gold clear as glass . . . ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ²⁵ Its gates will never close by day because it will never be night there.

When we get to this point in our text, it may challenge us. We even may have objections because the church does not even come close to resembling what we find in Isaiah 60 and Revelation 21.

Friends, do not be fooled or discouraged by the imperfections in the current state of the church. God does not look on the outside but upon the hearts of His people.

God's church is not currently what it will become. It is being built up by His Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel. God magnifies His own greatness in the ordinary worship of Christ.

Here is the good news, eventually, we, His church, His Holy Bride, will fully become who God says we are. That day is coming, and those who love Jesus will be a part of the Holy City.

But, right now, we are not quite there. However, we do resemble v. 11. We are the Holy City where the gates are never shut. Day and night, people are called by the gospel to repent and believe in Jesus.

Right now, the doors of God's Holy City are never closed. The opening of the doors of the church are open to all people groping in darkness but seeking the light. Those who come out of the darkness and step into the marvelous light of Christ are saved.

But, as v. 12 says, those who reject the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ will perish. They will only know everlasting death in Hell.

So, because of the glory of the coming age and because of the horror for those who never place their faith in Jesus, we must hold out the gospel to those who have yet to believe.

IV. Behold the Righteousness of God's Holy City (Isaiah 60:17-22)

Verses 17-22 describe how God will make His people great! These verses describe the final condition of God's Holy People, or we can also say God's Holy City.

God only has the best for God's people. Verse 17 says it will be filled with gold instead of bronze, silver instead of iron, bronze instead of wood, and iron instead of stones. This is figurative language that describes the last part of v. 17 and v. 18, where we see the city is filled with peace and righteousness, and gone is violence, devastation, and destruction. Notice that the walls of this city are called *Salvation*. The wall of *salvation* was built by the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God, who saves His people and makes us living stones in that wall. This wall is precious beyond all compare.

Then vv. 19-22 tells us that in God's city, there is no need for sun or moon because the Lord God will be their Everlasting Light. There will be no more sorrow, pain, or death, for those days will be over. There will be no more struggle with sin because God's people will be righteous and glorified. God's people from every tribe and tongue will have been grafted into the Branch of Christ, and in this—God is glorified.

Honestly, it is hard for us to get our minds around what life in the Holy City of God will look like. It is hard for earthly words to describe heavenly realities. It may even be hard to believe that this will happen when right now, the world seems so dark, so wicked, and unredeemable. Yet, it will happen. In this age, we have been given a taste of heaven in the gospel. This taste of heaven causes us to wait in hope for its fulfillment.

Until it is fully and finally fulfilled, we must be like Abraham and believe God's promise and not waver. Remember what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 4:20-21:

He [Abraham] did not waver in unbelief at God's promise but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,²¹ because he was fully convinced that what God had promised, he was also able to do.

The promise God made to Abraham was hard for him to believe at first. It is much like the promise we are called to believe in Isaiah 60. But, like Abraham, we must be fully convinced that God is able to do what He has promised.

Conclusion: Finally, here is the million-dollar question: *How do we wait in faith when life seems so hard, and the world seems so dark? How do we live in this period of who God says we are and what we will become, but we know we are not yet there? We call the struggle in this period "living in the already but the not yet." How do we live in this in-between time?*

Here is the struggle: There is a gap between what we *know* and what we *feel*. In other words, *I know the church is God's Holy Bride, but it feels like it is in bad shape and it will never survive.*

So, what do we do with our *feelings about the church? If you have been hurt in church, then you know first-hand what I am talking about because church should be where we go for healing, not to be hurt. Church is where we go to be built up, not to be torn down. So, when we hear and read a glorious text on the church that does not match our experience, what do we do?*

How do we bridge the gap between what we *know God says is true about us* and what we *feel is true about us*? The key is—*Meditation*.

Here is an equation to help us in our struggle: *Know—Meditate—Do*. Psalm 19:14 says:

*May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.*

We need to meditate on what we know to be true. But here is where the struggle comes and where we often fall short. We are often better at rehearsing the hurt, we rehearse the pain, and we rehearse how others have let us down, don't we? We focus on our hurts, our anger, our disappointments, and even the shortcomings of the church. In other words, we are only noticing the bumps, warts, bruises, scars, and sins of the church. We meditate on the wrong things.

Listen, I am a realist. I know the church in its current state is full of sinners, and it is imperfect. However, God wants us to live by faith in His promise. The problem is the world tells us that our *faith* is really *a fantasy*.

Friends, when Abraham believed God, he was not living in a fantasy world. He believed that God would fulfill His promise to give him a son in his old age.

Abraham acted on what He knew to be true. He lived in the real world and meditated on the promise. He struggled because He wanted to meditate on God's delay in fulfilling His promise. He was tempted to meditate on his frustration, but in time he learned to trust God and not waiver.

Living by faith in this dark world means *knowing* what is true from God's word, *meditating* on that truth, rehearsing the truth in your heart and mind, and then *acting* on that truth: *Know—Meditate—Do*.

There is a hymn by Isaac Watts that helps us bridge the gap between what we know and what we feel called *We're Marching to Zion*. Listen to its words:

*Come, we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known,
Join in a song with sweet accord,
Join in a song with sweet accord,*

*And thus surround the throne,
And thus surround the throne.*

*Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God;
But children of the heavenly King,
But children of the heavenly King
May speak their joys abroad,
May speak their joys abroad.*

*The hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets
Before we reach the heavenly fields,
Before we reach the heavenly fields
Or walk the golden streets,
Or walk the golden streets.*

*Then let our songs abound, and every tear be dry.
We're marching through Immanuel's ground,
We're marching through Immanuel's ground
To fairer worlds on high,
To fairer worlds on high.*

*We're marching to Zion,
Beautiful, beautiful Zion.
We're marching upward to Zion,
The beautiful city of God, of God!³*

It is songs like this that help us meditate and bridge the gap between what we know and what we do. In his commentary on Isaiah 60, Ray Ortlund, Jr. closes out this chapter by saying:

The gospel is God drawing back the veil, revealing his strong promises, and saying to us, "Arise, shine for your light has come." Do not cower in fear, as if the future held nothing for you but death. Believe the gospel. Swallow it whole (meditate on it). You will grow strong as you give glory to God.⁴

³ We're Marching to Zion (Lyrics), Words by Isaac Watts, Robert Lowry (Refrain) Music by Robert Lowry; http://www.praisegathering.com/media-files/pdf/A08943c_lyrics.pdf.

⁴ Ray Ortlund, *Preaching the Word: Isaiah*, 405.