

You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride...let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits. (v.12, 16)

The wedding is over and we head off into married life. What we have here described for us I think is the wedding night – the groom and his bride all alone together after the celebrations of the day. They are preparing to consummate their marriage. And in this scene we see the groom praise his bride for her appearance and her character. Far too many people today are interested in appearance and then the lust for sex. This man admires his lover's appearance but also speaks of her character.

It's almost as if in the opening verses she is undressing before him and he gets to see parts of her that he has never seen before. There is a sense of keen anticipation for him. And notice how he starts with her eyes which have been behind the veil and that he can now see as the veil is taken off. And so it goes on as he tells her how beautiful she is (v.1, 7) and he sees no flaw in her. She is all he has been waiting for.

It's not just her appearance though for he goes on in this tender scene to compliment and praise her for her character. He calls for her now to leave behind the northern region, to leave her family and her fears (alluded to with lion's dens and leopards) – and to 'come with me.' Before he asked her to pledge the sharing of her virginity, he pledged the sharing of his life. It is right for us to admire the beauty in each other – both the physical appearance and the character of our lover.

And as he praises her here a quick word on verse 12 and 16. He speaks of his bride being a garden locked up and I think he is referring to the fact that they have both kept each other pure until this night. Solomon testifies to the fact she has been closed to his physical love before marriage and now she is appropriately open to it. The physical part of our loving relationships is meant to be enjoyed within marriage. Don't spoil it by rushing into it...take your time and wait for marriage.

Pray: thanking God for the beauty and character of your spouse.

Reflect: am I waiting patiently for marriage in order to share my physical love with my lover?

His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. (v.16)

The wife here in chapter 5 ends the chapter by talking of her husband and all his attributes – including his sweet mouth. She has enjoyed their tender moments and his kiss. He is altogether lovely. But the end of the chapter is set against the backdrop of the start. They are now married and as in all marriages there has been tension. They have fallen out - and fallen out over trivial matters.

The bride has ended her day, fastened the door, and gone to bed with the expectation of sleeping until morning. The groom arrives from some late-night outdoor endeavour, wide awake and intent on an intimate interlude before going to sleep. He has one plan; she has another. It is worth noting that when the groom spoke to his bride on their wedding night, he was thoughtful and patient. But look at the way he speaks now. He uses a succession of staccato phrases, one after another, delivered without thought. He is only interested in his own needs. Sexual relations are not about meeting one's own needs; they are about delighting each other. We should concentrate on satisfying the other and not ourselves (although that will naturally happen).

She then changes her mind and turns to him but he has gone off in the huff. Her heart sinks as she tries to call out to him but he has gone. And in those distraught moments of breakdown, she remembers all that drew her to him and speaks of him being 'altogether lovely'. She remembers the good and is drawn into a deeper love and appreciation for him.

Tension will come in marriage. There will be times we disagree and fall out, times when we say something we shouldn't or expect something to happen in a certain way and it doesn't. The important thing is to not let it become a wedge between us. Remember why it is you love your spouse and why you married them. Look for their point of view and not selfishly at your own.

Pray: asking God to help you love your spouse with all your heart and to treat them well always.

Reflect: am I quick to forgive and move on?

I am my lover's and my lover is mine...you are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah, lovely as Jerusalem, majestic as troops with banners. (v.3, 4)

We all experience tension in marriage and have those moments when we argue and fall out. One of the joys of falling out is that you have to make up (not that I encourage you to fall out just to enjoy the making up!). Here in chapter 6 we see the wife reaffirm her love for her lover as she declares she is his and he is hers. Unlike our modern world where a disagreement like this would lead to separation, this disagreement leads to the recognition that they love each other, will need to work at it, and will stay together forever.

During the time of the fall out the husband has been considering his wife and now comes and shares his thoughts with her. They have reconciled and he speaks of her beauty once more. Unlike the wedding speech he does not move on to her body and thoughts of the sexual union to come, here he speaks only of her face, and he compares her to the most beautiful women of that day - the queens and concubines and women of court - and he says "You are better than all of them. In fact, they admire you." She is confident and beautiful, and he gazes on her with tremendous respect. She has become a woman of significance and personal authority, worthy of her husband's respect.

I think it is helpful to hear him be able to speak of her that way. When we first encountered the bride in chapter 1, she was uncertain and doubted her worth (verses 5-7). Now her husband sees not only what has been true of her all along but also what is true of her now. He can see what God has done in her life - the growth and significance she has attained - and it's as if he is looking at her and asking, "Who is this person?"

The encouragement for us is to stick together always, and to see other as God sees us. It is also to look at each other and see what God has been doing in each other's lives and to praise him for that.

Pray: thanking God for what he has been doing in your spouse's life.

Reflect: how can I show my love and respect for my spouse?

How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O Love, with your delights! (v.6)

They have overcome their difficulties and the falling out they had, and here we see Solomon and his bride start all over again. They share wonderful words of encouragement with each other. Solomon speaks again of the beauty of his wife and this time he describes her whole body. In chapter 4, he made only a brief reference to her body and in chapter 6 he doesn't mention her body at all - only her face. But here he describes all of her, and he is very comfortable doing so. She is fully dressed, but in his mind's eye he can see all of her, and he is comfortable with who she is. There is no hesitancy, no locked garden here. There is no sense that lovemaking is a mystery to them; it is familiar territory.

If we look at the groom's words in chapter 6 and chapter 7 together, they really make a marvellous statement, don't they? We see how much he respects her, how much he admires her, and how much he even fears her ('Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me.') All of this language of respect and comfort and connectedness and fun taken together is very powerful. And we have the opportunity as husbands and wives to speak this way to each other.

Now, most of the time our marriages aren't on this high plateau of admiration and peaceful connection. But it is something to hope for and to work toward; to that end, the Song of Songs can be a great encouragement.

And as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, we can speak such words of affirmation to one another. We don't need to be married to tell others how much we believe in them, what good we see being accomplished by the Spirit of God in their lives, how much we enjoy their company. We have the chance to encourage one another in all kinds of settings. Let's use our words well to build up and encourage others.

Pray: asking God to deepen our love for our spouse and strengthen our marriage.

Reflect: in what ways can I speak words of encouragement to my spouse today?

Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. (v.7)

An elderly married couple were lying in bed one night when the wife said softly to her husband ‘Do you remember how when we first married you always used to hold my hand in bed?’ ‘Yes I do,’ he answered and in the darkness, under the covers in his gnarled old hand reached out and took hers. ‘And do you remember how then you used to snuggle up to me and keep me warm on a cold night like tonight?’ ‘Yes I do,’ he said and in the darkness, under the covers he grunted and groaned as he twisted his body to where she was lying and cuddled up next to her. ‘And do you remember how then you used to nibble my ear?’ ‘Yes,’ he said and with a sigh turned back the covers and started to get out of bed. ‘Where are you going?’ the wife asked. ‘To get my teeth.’

Love does not diminish over time, it only grows stronger. This final scene in Song of Songs portrays the original ‘marriage encounter’ where they reaffirm their love for each other. The wife speaks of the strength of their love and verse 6 and 7 are really the 1 Corinthians 1-8 of the Old Testament. Four qualities of love appear here. Firstly that love is unyielding in marriage, as death is to life. Secondly that love is intense like the brightest flame. Thirdly that love is invincible or unquenchable, even when flooded by difficulty. And fourthly love is so priceless that it cannot be bought; only given away.

This couple have experienced that love from the days of a fledgling relationship through the joys of a wedding into a marriage with its ups and downs. And they stayed together and worked at it. And that’s what we are called to do as well. Love is not simply a feeling...it is a verb, a doing word. We are to work at showing our love for each other.

And never stop loving each other. Be like Solomon’s wife here whose closing words are that encouragement to come together and enjoy each other.

Pray: giving thanks for your spouse and asking God to help you show your love for them day by day.

Reflect: how can I show my love for my spouse today?

*Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! (v.16)*

In Mexico and the tropical zones of South America a so-called “strangler” fig grows in abundance. The Spanish-speaking people refer to it as the “matapalo” which means “the tree killer.” The fruit is not palatable except to cattle and the fowls of the air. After the birds eat it, they must clean their beaks of the sticky residue. They do this by rubbing them on nearby trees. The seeds of the small fig have a natural glue which makes them adhere to the branches. When the rainy season arrives, germination takes place. Soon tiny roots make their way down into the heart of the wood and begin to grow. Within a few years the once lovely palms have become entirely covered with the entangling vines of the parasitic growth. Unless the tree is set free through the removal of these “strangler” figs, it finally begins to wither, dropping one frond after another until it is completely lifeless. The only way to stop the killing process is for someone to take a sharp knife and cut away the invader.

The same is true of sin. Sin so easily entangles us and if we are not firm in dealing with it, it will continue to harm us and drive a wedge between us and God. Isaiah recognised this in his day. He came as prophet of God to challenge the people of Israel to stop their wickedness and rebellion, to deal with their sin and turn from it, and to follow the Lord. As God speaks through Isaiah here in chapter 1 he says that as the people come to pray he turns from them on account of their sin (v.15). The challenge is for them to ‘*wash and make yourselves clean*’ and to ‘*stop doing wrong and learn to do right!*’

How serious are you about your sin? Are you willing to do something about it? We have a responsibility to deal with our sin by confessing it before God, turning from it and following Jesus, accepting the forgiveness he offers through Christ’s death on the cross.

Pray: asking God to forgive you for your sin today in thought, word and deed.

Reflect: do I daily confess my sins before God, asking him daily to help me resist temptation?

Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD. (v.5)

Sometimes as a kid, when playtime came and the teams for football were beginning to get chosen, you knew just which team was going to win. You knew from the first few kids that were picked, just how awesome one of the teams was going to be, and you wanted to be on that team too. And there was just no swapping once you had been picked. No matter how hard you tried you were rarely able to convince anyone on the winning side to swap to let you play for them. We like to be on the winning team.

I'm sure the children of Israel wanted to be on the winning team. Yet the world for them was a tough place. They had rebelled against God and gone their own way. They were full of sin and this had broken their relationship with God. There seemed to be disputes and wars all around them, nation taking up sword against nation.

As Isaiah speaks into that situation he gives the people a glimpse of the future. He tells them what will happen in the last days. And he encourages them to be walking with God and in God's ways. He declares that there will be peace as God judges the world. And the call is for them to listen to the teaching of the Word and walk in God's way.

You don't have to wonder about who wins at the end of the world. We have already seen the ending. We know who wins. Don't you want to be on His side? Don't be deceived into thinking that you can play around with Satan and the world now, and then switch sides when the end comes. You're either for Jesus or against Him. If you are trying to skate through life, calling Jesus Lord but secretly living like the devil, you're headed in the wrong direction. It's time to heed the call now and to walk in the light of the LORD.

Pray: asking God to help us walk in his light and his ways always.

Reflect: am I on the winning side? Have I put my trust completely in God and am I walking in the light of the LORD?

Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. (v.10)

There are years in South Africa when locusts swarm the land and eat the crops. They come in hordes, blocking out the sun. The crops are lost and a hard winter follows. The “years that the locusts eat” are feared and dreaded. But the year after the locusts, South Africa reaps its greatest crops, for the dead bodies of the locusts serve as fertiliser for the new seed. And the locust year is restored as great crops swell the land. This is a parable of our lives. There are seasons of deep distress and afflictions that sometimes eat all the usefulness of our lives away. Yet, the promise is that God will restore those locust years if we endure. We will reap if we faint not. Although now we do not know all the “whys”, we can be assured our times are in His hands.

And this is what Isaiah encourages the people of Israel with here in Isaiah 3. He tells them a time is coming when the Lord will deal with their sins and the evil will be dealt with and punished. He says that the evil will receive pay back for they have done and the righteous will be rewarded.

This is an encouragement for those who are holding out and doing what is right. Sometimes we get discouraged and feel like it’s not worth it. We look around in our world today and see those who do evil flourish and seemingly good people suffer. But it will not always be that way. The righteous will reap fruit from their doing right.

The call for us is to remain faithful to God. We are to keep following him all our days and he will reward us for that in his time. We always struggled working with our wee YF in Crieff wondering if they ever listened and thought about giving up as we saw no fruit. But we persevered and remained faithful. And then God rewarded our labour when we took them to a Billy Graham rally and 6 of the 7 went forward to give their lives to the Lord. The encouragement is to stick in and hang on and keep serving God faithfully.

Pray: asking God to help us remain faithful.

Reflect: am I patiently waiting for the fruit from my labour?

In that day the branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. (v.2)

During dark, difficult moments for a nation, it's important to have a leader who can see the hope on the horizon and communicate that to a weary people. Prime Minister Winston Churchill played that role for Great Britain during World War II, reminding the exhausted, attacked, and grieving that although the price was heavy, they could defeat the Nazis and repel an invasion. The strength of his hope gave millions of people the encouragement to fight on against Nazi aggression.

Dark clouds of invasion, persecution, and exile swirled around the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Even though their people often rejected their message, it never became so dark that the prophets couldn't see the light, as God gave them visions of future glory and redemption.

Here is Isaiah 4, the prophet speaks of a coming day when the branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious. He is looking forward in one sense to the return from Babylonian captivity of the people of Israel, yet in another he is looking forward to Jesus. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is called the Righteous Branch. Jesus came as a 'shoot' from the seeming dead stump of David's dynasty. Jesus deserves this interesting title not only because He is righteous, but also because He makes His people righteous by taking their sins upon Himself and placing them on the Cross. This title also occurs in Jeremiah 23:5 and 33:15 and also Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12.

Isaiah encourages the people that God will cleanse His people, restore the fruitfulness of the land and dwell with them as he did when he led them through the wilderness.

We have hope for the future because Jesus did die on the cross to save us from our sin, and he has promised he is coming back one day to take us to be with him forever. Let's keep sharing that hope.

Pray: thanking God for the sure and certain hope we have.

Reflect: are you sure of your place in heaven?

And he looked for justice but saw bloodshed; for righteousness but heard cries of distress. (v.7)

In Isaiah 5 and Ezekiel 15, we find a similar account of God's experience with Israel. Israel is likened to a vineyard; the Lord is the gardener and caretaker. Look at the care God lavished on His vineyard, 'His delight.' He chose a fertile hillside, rich in good soil; He cleared away stones and planted the best vines. Anticipating a good crop, He built a winepress to catch the grape juice and a watchtower to guard the harvest. But what was the harvest He gained? 'Only bad fruit' (v.2).

What fruit was the Lord expecting from Israel? The NIV Study Bible suggests that a wordplay in Hebrew answers this question: "He looked for justice [mishpat], but saw bloodshed [mispah]; for righteousness [sedaqah], but heard cries of distress [se'aqah]" (v.7). In other words, Israel had been equipped to produce justice and righteousness: it had been chosen by God, delivered from oppression by His hand, given the law, and blessed with the tabernacle of God's presence. Instead, Israel produced fruit that defied its careful cultivation.

A preacher visits an elderly woman from his congregation. As he sits on the couch he notices a large bowl of peanuts on the coffee table. "Mind if I have a few" he asks. "No, not at all" the woman replied. They chat for an hour and as the preacher stands to leave, he realises that instead of eating just a few peanuts, he emptied most of the bowl. "I'm terribly sorry for eating all your peanuts; I really just meant to eat a few." "Oh that's all right" the woman says. "Ever since I lost my teeth all I can do is suck the chocolate off them."

Things aren't always exactly quite what you think they are. God is looking for good fruit. He's looking for His kind of love in our lives. Let's allow God to work in and through us to accomplish all He sets out to accomplish. Let's bear good fruit for God and not bad.

Pray: asking God to help us bear good fruit.

Reflect: do I allow God to have His way in my life?

Woe to me...for I am a man of unclean lips...and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty. (v.5)

Just a few miles from New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns is Lechuguilla Cave. Explorers who have descended into its interior describe a wonderland whose beauty is beyond almost anything they have ever seen. One geologist noted, "Everything is alien...I've been in caves that are so beautiful that you just have to leave. You just can't take it." That's an interesting dilemma for explorers, isn't it? To be surrounded by beauty that is overwhelming to the eyes.

Their experience gives us a clue to the problem we have with understanding a holy God. He is so arrayed in splendour, so pure in His goodness, and so beautiful in His character that our sin-darkened eyes cannot bear to look on Him. We cannot endure His glory. Isaiah was given a glimpse of heaven. He saw the LORD seated on His throne with the heavenly creatures surrounding Him singing 'Holy is the LORD Almighty.' And as he stood looking at the glory of the LORD he became acutely aware of his own sinfulness and that of the people around him. And yet in those moments a seraph touched his lips with a burning coal and his sin was atoned for. He was then able to respond to the Lord's call to serve Him.

There are some key words here about Isaiah's commissioning. ***I saw*** speaks of seeing the LORD. There are too many people doing ministry who don't have a grasp of who God is. We should look and see the LORD high and exalted. ***Woe to me*** speaks of that moment when we realise our sinfulness before God. ***Your sin atoned for*** shows us that the conviction of sin in the previous words has led to cleansing here. ***Who will go*** is that call from God to go and serve – are you listening and are you serving. ***Never understanding*** reminds us that it will be tough serving God and we may not always see results. ***Send me*** is the heartfelt response of one who has seen the Lord's glory, recognised their own sin, had that sin forgiven and heard the call to go. Have you seen this cycle in your own life?

Pray: thanking God that our sin is atoned for.

Reflect: what is God saying to me through this chapter?

Say to him "Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid." (v.4)

Green Bay Packers' (American football team) head coach Mike Holmgren looks back at a heartbreaking moment, when he was cut from the New York Jets as backup quarterback to Joe Namath, that directed him to a bigger plan.

"I had committed my life to Jesus Christ when I was 11, but in my pursuit to make a name for myself in football, I left God next to my dust-covered Bible. But after getting cut from the Jets, I pulled out my Bible and found comfort in a verse I had memorised in Sunday school: 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart; and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.' (Proverbs 3:5-6). I asked Jesus Christ to take control again. My priorities in life are faith, family, and football - in that order."

God promises us that as we grow to trust Him more, we will experience more and more of His peace. Ahaz needed to hear that message here in Isaiah 7. The king was playing power politics rather than trusting in God – and it was getting him into bother. His closest allies had now turned against him and were marching up to fight against him. Ahaz is afraid. His heart is wavering and the hearts of his people had been shaking for fear. It's into that situation that Isaiah comes with a message of assurance: *Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid*. How could Ahaz find this inner peace? By believing God's promise that Judah's enemies would be defeated.

Faith in God's promises is the only way to find peace in the midst of trouble. Isaiah knew that and shared it with the king. The challenge for us too is to trust in God with all our hearts and walk in his ways. When we trust his Word and his promises we can rest in peace. When we follow his ways he will lead us in the right way. Stop struggling and worrying...look to the Lord and his promises.

Pray: thanking God for his faithfulness and his promises.

Reflect: do I believe the promises of God?

Devise your strategy but it will be thwarted; propose your plan but it will not stand, for God is with us. (v.10)

A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he strutted through the backyard, wearing his baseball cap and toting a ball and bat: “I’m the greatest hitter in the world,” he announced. Then, he tossed the ball into the air, swung at it, and missed. “Strike One!” he yelled. Undaunted, he picked up the ball and said again, “I’m the greatest hitter in the world!” He tossed the ball into the air. When it came down he swung again and missed. “Strike Two!” he cried. The boy then paused a moment to examine his bat and ball carefully. He spit on his hands and rubbed them together. He straightened his cap and said once more, “I’m the greatest hitter in the world!” Again he tossed the ball up in the air and swung at it. He missed. “Strike Three!” “Wow!” he exclaimed. “I’m the greatest pitcher in the world!”

Things aren’t always what they seem. Though we may not understand our circumstances at the present (we may not understand exactly what we’re the greatest at) but we can be sure that God is on our side. He is with us. If God is on our side, what are we afraid of? The hard thing is that just like in Isaiah’s time, sometimes it doesn’t look as if God is on our side.

Ahaz and the people were confused with all that was going on and instead of trusting God they decided to ally themselves with the Assyrians. They trusted Assyria and not God. And of course Isaiah warns them that they have chosen a flood instead of a peaceful river (v.5-10), a snare instead of a sanctuary (v.11-15), and darkness instead of light (v.16-22). In their time of crisis, instead of turning to God for wisdom the people consulted demons (v.19).

No matter what is going on in life around, let us remember that God has told us he is on our side – he is Immanuel, God with us. Let’s keep trusting in him.

Pray: thanking God for being with us always.

Reflect: do I trust that God is with me always?

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. (v.2)

After it became obvious that the Allies' policy of appeasing Adolf Hitler had failed to stop the Nazi leader's plans for war and conquest, one British leader described the dark situation in memorable terms. "The lamps are going out all over Europe, and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

The situation looked dark in the northern region of Israel after the Assyrians invaded in 732 B.C. and put the people under their rule. The region even came to be called "Galilee of the Gentiles" because of its domination by the foreigners.

But Isaiah used this dark period of Israel's history to prophesy of a time when the darkness and gloom would be lifted. That happened hundreds of years later when Jesus began His ministry in this same area - an occasion which Matthew noted by quoting from Isaiah (Matthew 4:13-16).

But Isaiah did not end his prophecy with Jesus' first coming. The prophet went on to describe the day when the Messiah would carry the government of the world on His shoulders. He would be born as a child, a clear reference to Christ's birth in Bethlehem. And he would grow to become '*wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of peace.*' Isaiah then tells us that the Messiah will reign forever.

You may be feeling like you're in the darkest, farthest place from God that is possible. But Jesus loves to be invited into dark rooms. He loves to lighten them up. You're not too far that He can't reach you. Be encouraged today that he is the light of the world. The child grew to become a man, that man died on the cross as the perfect Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, and as Lord he was raised to life again and is seated as King of kings and Lord of lords in heaven. And he will reign forever. Walk into the light today.

Pray: thanking God for the gift of the light of the world.

Reflect: am I walking in the light?

In that day the remnant of Israel...will truly rely on the LORD the Holy One of Israel. (v.20)

Who are you trusting in? When we put our trust in people, we will eventually be disappointed. Under King Ahaz, Judah had been counting on the Assyrians to deliver them but it didn't happen as he expected. Isaiah reminds the people that the Lord will have the victory and that they should fully rely on him. (The Christian bracelet encourages us with the word FROG – fully rely on God)

Sometimes it's certain people we always count on to bail us out of our problems. It's not uncommon for us younger folks to expect our parents to deliver us from all our bad financial decisions. Sometimes it's when we find our heart so thrilled with a person, perhaps even the hope of a friendship or relationship with them, and we begin to find all our joy coming from being with that person rather than being in the Lord. Even in marriage, it's not hard to find yourself counting more on your spouse for your sense of fulfilment than you do the Lord. It's not that we can't find joy in our relationships, but what are we counting on most?

When we put our trust in the Lord, we will never be disappointed. Yet it's hard to trust in someone you can't see.

We're like the little girl who was frightened by the clamour of thunder in the night. Holding her securely in his arms, her father explained that she needn't fear. God would take care of her because He loved her greatly. "I know God will take care of me and love me," she replied. "But right now, Daddy, I want someone with skin on to love me."

Though God at times gives us people with "skin on" to be a part of our lives, there is a place where God wants us to be where we are ultimately putting our trust in Him. That's what walking by faith is all about. Not seeing God, but trusting Him anyway.

Pray: asking God for help in trusting Him more.

Reflect: who am I trusting in?

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. (v.2)

Here Isaiah is speaking of the shoot that will spring up from the stump of Jesse – this is from the line of David. He is speaking of Jesus. And verse 2 is a wonderful verse that speaks of the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Jesus. If you notice, there are actually *seven* aspects of the Holy Spirit listed here. Part of God’s goal in our lives is to mould us more and more into the image of Jesus. This is part of the work that the Holy Spirit does in our lives. That means that when we see lists like this of what Jesus is like, we ought to consider how God might be wanting to mould us.

The first thing listed here is that the Holy Spirit *rests* on him. If you really have the Holy Spirit working in your life, then you’ll be finding that you’ll be talking a lot about the Lord. You’ll be talking a lot about Jesus. If you have a difficult time talking about the Lord openly, could it be that you’re not allowing the Holy Spirit to “rest” upon you? Then we see that the Spirit brings *wisdom*. Wisdom is applied knowledge. It’s not just knowing things, but knowing what’s right, putting all the pieces together. Then there is *understanding* or discernment. Jesus was able to see right through people. He could see their motives. (Matthew 22:18).

Next up is *counsel* - the ability to make plans and decisions. We are often looking for someone to give us advice or counsel. We have a great need for it. Sometimes I think the Lord would really appreciate it if we considered going to Him. The more we grow in the Lord, the more we will find ourselves receiving counsel from Him. Then there is *power*. The Spirit doesn’t just give us the ability to make decisions, but the strength to carry them out. *Knowledge* is next and perhaps this is the knowledge of the deep things of God. It’s only with the Holy Spirit in our life that we are able to have any kind of understanding at all into the ways of God. And we finish with *fear of the LORD*. Having a healthy awe, fear, and respect for God is where understanding and wisdom start.

Pray: asking God to keep filling us with the Spirit.

Reflect: do I have a healthy awe, fear and respect for God?

The LORD, the LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. (v.2)

After winning many trophies and awards, tennis player Michael Chang lost the 1992 French Open and Wimbledon. He knew something was wrong, and discussed with his family the reason for the change in his playing: they hadn't been praying before each game like they had in the beginning.

“We then vowed to work as a team to praise God, to focus on Him, to worship Him, to thank Him, and to learn from Him,” Chang says. “We took that preparation and mentality into the U.S. Open, and although I didn't win, we came away feeling that it was a success and that God's work was done.”

Isaiah, too, knew the importance of praising God. Today's passage teaches us that true prayer to the Father begins with praise and thanksgiving. This brief but important chapter is a two-stanza hymn of praise to God. In it, His Messianic King, Jesus Christ, has finally taken His throne. This gives us a foretaste of the worship we will experience when Jesus sets up His kingdom on earth.

The people speaking God's praise are the remnant of Israel, redeemed by God's mighty hand and enjoying the blessings of the Messiah's righteous rule in His millennial kingdom. In v.1-3 the remnant praises and worships God for the great salvation He has accomplished for His people.

Then in v.4-6 the remnant calls on all the people of the earth to join them in worship and exaltation of God. The arrival of God's long-promised kingdom will vindicate His great name before every nation. The only proper response to the '*glorious things*' God has done and will do in the Millennium: offer Him thanks, sing His praises, and shout aloud for joy.

Pray: praise and thank God for being your strength and song and salvation.

Reflect: do I sing a song of praise during my devotional time? Give it a try.

See the day of the LORD is coming – a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger – to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. (v.9)

These next ten chapters see Isaiah's messages move from being to the people of God to being to the other nations of the day. They are all nations who at some time had or would persecute Israel. Isaiah calls these prophetic declarations 'oracles' although that word could also be translated as 'burdens' The prophet was carrying a heavy weight because of the solemn nature of his message. He was announcing judgements that involved the destruction of cities and the slaughter of thousands of people. No wonder he felt burdened.

Isaiah begins with a word for Babylon and in the opening 5 verses we see God mustering an army to stand against the nation of Babylon. The rest of the chapter is the picture of God punishing his enemies. They are being punished for their evil deeds and nature, for being arrogant and proud. God's wrath is on them.

We need to be careful that we don't get the wrong idea about this. God's wrath is not based on His moods. His wrath is based on the principle of justice. His wrath is the very appropriate, just and fair payment for man's sin. Having a problem with this? Think of some of mankind's atrocities that we've done to one another. Is it appropriate for society to punish a man who stalks, tortures and kills another person? Of course it is. God's "wrath" is no different. It is the appropriate penalty for our sin.

And the warning for us is that there is a day coming when God will punish sin and destroy sinners. It will be judgement day. He is giving us ample warning though through his prophets and his word. He is giving us time to change our ways and turn from sin (Ezekiel 33:11). He sent Jesus to pay the price for our sin – he took the punishment which we deserved. Yet we have to turn to from our sin to him – to trust him only for our salvation. If you've not done that then heed the warning. And let's make sure we warn others too.

Pray: thanking God for our salvation.

Reflect: how can I warn others of the coming judgement on sinners?

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You are brought down to the grave to the depths of the pit. (v.12, 15)

The once-famous flying feet have been reduced to a painful shuffle, struggling to obey a mind that has absorbed too many blows in too many boxing matches. Muhammad Ali, “The Champ,” was once the most famous athlete in the world. Today the man who often boasted, “I am the greatest,” suffers from Parkinson’s disease. The fighter who bragged of what he would do to each opponent looked back at his life and said, “I had the world, and it wasn’t nuthin’.” With that self-assessment, Muhammad Ali joined a long line of kings and queens and champions and captains of industry whose prideful boasts have been short-lived. We remember Ali’s arrogant speeches of the 1960s, but self-asserting pride was not born in the locker room of a boxing tournament. It originated in heaven, with Lucifer.

Today’s verses are the end of an oracle against Babylon. Although the rulers of Babylon were as prideful and arrogant as any on earth, the writer points to another prideful being. Beginning in v.14, he writes of the “morning star,” a term translated as “Lucifer” in the Latin version of the Bible.

This “morning star” is Satan, the once-beautiful angel who wanted to exalt himself above God. His five “I will” boasts outline his plot to claim the power and glory of God for himself. But God did not tolerate Satan’s arrogance: “Your heart became proud...So I threw you to the earth” (Ezekiel 28:17). Satan’s prideful rebellion changed the course of human history in the Garden of Eden. There the former “morning star,” now eating the dust of the earth as a serpent, tempted Eve with the same sin. He tempted her with the same prideful desire for God’s power that had led to his own downfall (Genesis 3). This interaction between Satan and Eve centred around pride. It planted in human hearts that fierce rebellion of spirit that says, “I will be my own god.”

Let’s watch our lives and make sure we keep God on the throne.

Pray: asking God to keep pride out of our hearts.

Reflect: do I try and do things in my own way or do I follow God’s ways?

My heart cries out over Moab. (v.5)

President Woodrow Wilson told this story. He said: “I was in a very common place, I was sitting in a barber chair, when I became aware that a personality had entered the room. A man had come quietly in upon the same errand as myself - to have his hair cut and sat in the chair next to me. Every word the man uttered showed a personal interest in the man who was serving him. And before I got through with what was being done for me, I was aware that I had attended an evangelistic service. Because Mr. D.L. Moody was in that chair.

I purposely lingered in the room after he had left and noted the singular effect that his visit had brought upon the barbershop. They didn't know his name but they knew that something had elevated their thoughts and I felt that I left that place as I should have left the place of worship. My admiration and esteem for Mr. Moody became very deep indeed.”

Moody was always concerned for others and took a real interest in them. By his presence and conversations hearts and minds were turned to the Saviour. I wonder if we have that same compassion on those who need to know Jesus?

Here in Isaiah 15 we come to the oracle concerning Moab. Isaiah's heart is burdened again. He shares God's warning of coming destruction on that land. They have been involved in worship of false gods (v.2) and it has led to their destruction. But Isaiah is grieved as he shares these words. He is concerned for the people of Moab and his heart cries out over them. He longs that they listen to the warning and turn back to God.

Are we as concerned for the lost around us? Do our hearts cry out over them?

Pray: asking God for a heart of compassion for the lost.

Reflect: how can I show my compassion and care for the lost around me today?

*My heart laments for Moab like a harp, my inmost being for Kir Hareseth.
(v.11)*

Howard Hendricks, a preacher and teacher recalls “Years ago in a church in Dallas we were having trouble finding a teacher for a junior high boys class. The list of prospects had only one name - and when they told me who it was I said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’ But I couldn’t have been more wrong about that young man. He took the class and revolutionised it. I was so impressed I invited him to my home for lunch and asked him the secret of his success. He pulled out a little black book. On each page he had a small picture of one of the boys, and under the boy’s name were comments like ‘having trouble in arithmetic,’ or ‘comes to church against parents’ wishes,’ or ‘would like to be a missionary some day, but doesn’t think he has what it takes.’ ‘I pray over those pages every day,’ he said, ‘and I can hardly wait to come to church each Sunday to see what God has been doing in their lives.’”

This man had a real heart for the children, took a real interest in them and prayed for them daily. Do you pray for those around you? Do you pray for the other folks at work? Do you pray for the people you know who are going through hard times, even if it seems that they deserve it?

Here in Isaiah 16 we see his continued burden for Moab. He warns of the trouble they are in. He speaks of their pride which has contributed to their downfall. And we get a glimpse of his heart of compassion for them. In v.11 he says that his heart laments for them and his inner being. That word is translated as bowels elsewhere. The ancients looked at the bowels as being the seat of the emotions. In contrast, we look at the heart as being where the affections and emotions come from. The prophet is again saying that he’s all torn up inside over what is going to happen to Moab.

I think it would do us well to be torn up inside for the lost around us – in our family, among our friends, at our work and beside our homes. What’s stopping you praying for them?

Pray: for the people you know who are lost.

Reflect: how can I pray more effectively for those around me?

You have forgotten God your Saviour; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress. (v.10)

The warning to Damascus comes now and Isaiah tells them the city will lie in ruins. They have forgotten God and gone their own way and that can only lead to destruction. They have turned to false gods and worshipped idols. They have made idols with their own hands but these are not satisfying them any longer. Isaiah speaks of the seeds they plant and tend and the harvest that comes – but even that brings them no joy and satisfaction. They have forgotten God and there is a missing piece in their life.

When we're trying our best to forget God, we will turn to all sorts of things to try and take away the pain. It may be that we try drugs, alcohol, or sex to take away the pain. Maybe we just try going on a special holiday or go out to dinner. Sometimes these things look pretty promising, there seems to be a measure of relief for a while, but soon the emptiness is back.

Only Jesus can fill the emptiness. You and I were created with a special purpose in mind, to be able to know and enjoy God. But when sin comes into the picture, that ability to relate to God is broken. The only way to mend the brokenness is to do something about the sin. It's not just a matter of stopping the sin, though that's important. It's a matter of actually paying the price for our sin that's required.

That's why Jesus came to earth and died on a cross. He died to pay the penalty for us. He died so that we wouldn't have to. And when we turn to Him, and ask His for His forgiveness, the rift between us and God is mended. It's only at that point that we can begin to taste of all the goodness that God has for us.

Let's not forget God our Saviour. Let's turn to him afresh today, thanking him for his grace and mercy, and walking in his ways always.

Pray: thanking God for Jesus.

Reflect: in what ways have I forgotten God in this past week?

I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place. (v.4)

Here comes the prophecy against Cush. They are a land of frantic activity going from nation to nation trying to make alliances to protect them from Assyria. Isaiah pictures the ambassadors in their light, swift boats, going back to the African nations for help.

In contrast to the frantic activity of men on earth is the calm patience of God in heaven as he awaits the right time to reap the harvest of judgement. The picture is that of God sitting on His throne, calmly watching as the Assyrian army begins to invade. Like the waves of heat coming off of something baking in the hot summer sun, God may not make much noise, but He's pretty powerful. It may seem that He's not doing anything now, but He's just waiting for the right time.

And for us that doesn't mean that God doesn't care. But He's not worried about what is happening to you. He will do what He needs to, just when He needs to. If we are doing what He asks us to do when we're in trouble, then we don't need to be filled with worry either: *'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'* Philippians 4:6-7

I read the story of a man who was the director of a YMCA in Philadelphia. Things were going bad and he was working 85 hours a week to try and keep the place open. He was on the verge of a nervous breakdown when a friend suggested that he had to find a way of letting go of the problems and letting God into the situation. As he took a walk that afternoon, he took a pencil and notepad and wrote God a note: "Dear God, today I hereby resign as general manager of the universe. Love, George." Much to his surprise, God accepted his resignation! Let's wait on God and trust in him.

Pray: thanking God for his constant care.

Reflect: what am I anxious about? Turn it over to God.

The officials of Zoan have become fools, the leaders of Memphis are deceived; the cornerstones of her peoples have led Egypt astray. (v.13)

A man was on the golf practice course, when the club pro, Maury, brought an important-looking man out for a lesson. Maury watched the guy swing several times and started making suggestions for improvement, but each time the pupil interrupted with his own versions of what was wrong and how to correct it. After a few minutes of this interference, Maury began nodding his head in agreement. At the end of the lesson, the man paid Maury, congratulated him on his expertise as a teacher and left in an obviously pleased frame of mind. The observer was so astonished by the performance, that he had to ask, “Why did you go along with him?” “Son,” the old pro said with a grin as he carefully pocketed his fee, “I learned long ago that it’s a waste of time to sell answers to a man who wants to buy echoes.”

The problem with bad counsel is that it is usually just what we want to hear. And in the middle of this chapter as Isaiah speaks of the oracle concerning Egypt he shares some thoughts on how they have been deceived and led astray. They have not been following God but rather the advice of people around them. They haven’t checked that advice but glibly followed along because it sounded right for them. Now it was leading to their downfall.

If you’re making your decisions in life based on what people think, and not on what God thinks, you’re heading for trouble. How can I get advice from God? Stay in the Word. Read the Word. If people are giving you advice and counsel, you’d better be sure it’s counsel coming from God’s Word. Don’t just settle for “religious sounding” talk. Make sure you always check it in the Word. Read your Bible every day. Don’t just read the same passage over and over. Take yourself through the entire Bible just as we are with *Through the Bible*.

Pray: asking God to help you know His Word better.

Reflect: do I check advice received against the Word of God?

Then the LORD said, “Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush...” (v.3)

A small town prosecuting attorney called his first witness to the stand in a trial—a grandmotherly, elderly woman. He approached her and asked, “Mrs. Jones, do you know me?” She responded, “Why, yes, I do know you Mr. Williams. I’ve known you since you were a young boy. And frankly, you’ve been a big disappointment to me. You lie, you cheat on your wife, you manipulate people and talk about them behind their backs. You think you’re a rising big shot when you haven’t the brains to realise you never will amount to anything more than a two-bit paper pusher. Yes, I know you.” The lawyer was stunned. Not knowing what else to do he pointed across the room and asked, “Mrs. Williams, do you know the defence attorney?” She again replied, “Why, yes I do. I’ve known Mr. Bradley since he was a youngster, too. I used to baby-sit him for his parents. And he, too, has been a real disappointment to me. He’s lazy, bigoted, he has a drinking problem. The man can’t build a normal relationship with anyone and his law practice is one of the shoddiest in the entire state. Yes, I know him.” At this point, the judge rapped the courtroom to silence and called both counsellors to the bench. In a very quiet voice, he said with menace, “If either of you asks her if she knows me, you’ll be jailed for contempt!”

What do people know you for? It’s not just a matter of being a person who “says” the right things, but someone whose life reflects the things they talk about, just as Isaiah is being a living demonstration. It was not uncommon for God to ask his prophets to do something that would give a chance to teach the people some lesson. People who hung around a prophet could expect to see some kind of tangible demonstration of God’s message to them. Can people see God’s Word active in your life? I’m not suggesting that you take your clothes off like Isaiah, but the world shouldn’t just hear us talking about Jesus, they ought to see Jesus at work in our lives.

Pray: asking God to help you be a good living witness for him.

Reflect: What do people know me for? Can people see God’s Word active in my life?

This is what the LORD says to me: Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end. (v.16)

I remember our first flat in Crieff. It was a nice flat and was just along the street from my three favourite Saturday morning places – the butcher where we bought everything for a nice fry for brunch, the baker where we got rolls and a nice cake, and the newsagents where we got the paper to read. All the ingredients for a nice leisurely Saturday. Then one day the news came that butcher was closing. Within weeks it became a fishmonger. That changed our Saturday habits but did mean I began to have more fish in my diet as we tried different types of fish each week. The fishmonger has now gone and the shop is now a florist – perhaps if we were still in Crieff Morag would get flowers every week!

Things change. Nothing stays the same. Here in Isaiah 21 the prophet is warning of changes coming. I'm sure there were folks in Dedan and Tema who were counting on the fabulous people of Kedar to always be there for them. They had nothing to worry about because the folks up in Kedar could handle anything! Wrong. He is warning them that the things they are putting their trust in will fail. There is only one real place of security and that is in God. He never changes (Hebrews 13:8)

There are things that we place great confidence in. They can all change. Sometimes the things we trust in are things like the security of a good job, or the fact that the economy is doing so well. That certainly used to be the case when I started work but oh how things have changed in recent years.

Storms come. Houses can be demolished. Whether your house stands through the storm all depends on what you've built your house upon. There's only one thing that will keep you standing in the storms of life, and that's your relationship with Jesus. Are you listening to what He's saying? Are you doing what He's asking? Are you following him fully and carefully?

Pray: praising God that he never changes.

Reflect: is my security in Christ alone?

There I said, "Turn away from me; let me weep bitterly." (v.4)

I wonder if you have ever felt like giving up on someone. You've advised them many times how to do something or how to deal with some situation in life but they simply just ignore you. You feel like your hitting your head off a brick wall. I've been there. And all you want to do is turn your back and walk away. I think that sometimes we can get a little frustrated with certain people in our lives. And I think that sometimes if we were to get a vision of these certain people going through a difficult time that we might be a relieved, perhaps even a little happy about it.

But Isaiah was upset and concerned – he had a heart of compassion for the people. Here is Isaiah 22 we read of the troubles on Jerusalem. And as he sees it all Isaiah is upset and says '*turn away from me; let me weep bitterly.*' He wants to cry because of all they are doing. He doesn't want them to see how upset he is. His heart is broken. And I would guess in this moment he is crying out before God for them too.

What's the problem? Well God has called on his people '*to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.*' He has called for them to fast and repent. Instead they were feasting – there is joy and revelry. The prophet reproached the people for celebrating with wild parties when they should have been in deep repentance because of their sins. In the face of a crisis that required genuine repentance, the people responded with hilarity and self-indulgence. Isaiah's pain was deep. He could not participate in the revelry because he saw the reality of the spiritual issues.

And in that moment he weeps for them bitterly. He wants the best for them but he sees them ignoring the Lord and carrying on regardless. What do you do in that situation? Do you say let them get on with it and suffer the consequences? Or do you weep bitterly for them and pray that their hearts will melt and change? I know what Jesus would do (Luke 13:31-35; 19:41-44).

Pray: for those who keep ignoring the gospel message.

Reflect: do I weep bitterly for the lost?

At the end of seventy years, the LORD will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire... (v.17)

Farmer Jones got out of his car and while heading for his friend's door, noticed a pig with a wooden leg. His curiosity roused, he ask, "Fred, how'd that pig get him a wooden leg?" "Well Michael, that's a mighty special pig! A while back a wild boar attacked me while I was walking in the woods. That pig there came a runnin', went after that boar and chased him away. Saved my life!" "And the boar tore up his leg?" "No he was fine after that. But a bit later we had that fire. Started in the shed up against the barn. Well, that ole pig started squealin' like he was stuck, woke us up, and 'fore we got out here, the darn thing had herded the other animals out of the barn and saved 'em all!" "So that's when he hurt his leg, Fred?" "No, Michael. He was a might winded, though. When my tractor hit a rock and rolled down the hill into the pond I was knocked clean out. When I came to, that pig had dove into the pond and dragged me out 'fore I drowned. Sure did save my life." "And that was when he hurt his leg?" "Oh no, he was fine. Cleaned him up, too." "OK, Fred. So just tell me. How did he get the wooden leg?" "Well", the farmer tells him, "A pig like that, you don't want to eat all at once!"

Just like the farmer, we don't always get the lessons down right, do we? It's hard to break old habits. We end up hurting the very ones who have done so much for us. It seems that Tyre wouldn't learn the lessons it was supposed to learn. Every time it went through a time of judgment, it would rebuild, and then go back to its old ways. And Isaiah warns Tyre what will happen here is Isaiah 23.

How often in life do we return to our sinful ways having been forgiven and living well for the Lord for a spell? A little temptation creeps in and we give in and before we know it we are back in sin again. Let's learn the lesson well and strive to live in the Lord's ways always.

Pray: asking God for the strength and courage to say no to temptation.

Reflect: do I learn the lesson or do I keep falling back into the same habitual sin?

See the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it...it will be the same for priest as for people, for master as for servant... (v.1-2)

The May 1984 National Geographic showed through colour photos and drawings the swift and terrible destruction that wiped out the Roman Cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in A.D. 79. The explosion of Mount Vesuvius was so sudden, the residents were killed while in their routine: men and women were at the market, the rich in their luxurious baths, slaves at toil. They died amid volcanic ash and superheated gasses. Even family pets suffered the same quick and final fate. The saddest part is that these people did not have to die. Scientists confirm what ancient Roman writer's record - weeks of rumblings and shakings preceded the actual explosion. Even an ominous plume of smoke was clearly visible from the mountain days before the eruption. If only they had been able to read and respond to Vesuvius's warning!

And God has warned his people that destruction will come upon them. He has warned what will happen if they keep ignoring him and his ways, and doing their own thing. He has warned that sin will be punished. Isaiah is warning the people here in Isaiah 24. The word see in verse 1 is also behold. And behold in the bible always anticipates a future event. The prophet was warning what will happen.

And notice the destruction will come on all people. There is no differential in place on account of status or position in society. The same fate awaits priest and people, master and servant, mistress and maid, seller and buyer, borrower and lender, debtor and creditor. God sees only two classes of people: saved and unsaved or wicked and faithful.

The bible warns that sin has a punishment and that punishment is death and eternal separation from God. He has provided a way out – Jesus took our punishment for us. But we have to respond to him and repent of our sin in order to receive that salvation. Have you heeded the warning?

Pray: thanking God for your salvation.

Reflect: do I warn others of the punishment for sin?

You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. (v.4)

The best correspondents for Life magazine were sent all over the world to ask the question, “What is the meaning of life?” They talked to philosophers and children, taxi drivers and Nile River boatmen. More than 100 premier photographers provided images.

There is one dramatic photograph of a lighthouse off the Brittany Coast. A huge Atlantic storm had sent gigantic waves around the mammoth brick structure, nearly swallowing it up. But on the sheltered side, literally surrounded by frothing, boiling waves, stood the lighthouse keeper. He was looking casually toward shore, his hands stuck nonchalantly in his pockets, as enormous waves crashed around him.

This powerful illustration reminds me of the many fierce storms of trial we face in life. And I am grateful for the promise that in God we are as safe as that lighthouse keeper. The words of Isaiah 25:4 are true for every believer: God is our refuge during the storms of physical affliction, emotional turmoil, and spiritual attack. With His protection we can endure any trial with the calm assurance that He who shields us cannot be moved. And that gives us peace no matter how turbulent our circumstances.

As Isaiah shares these words here he does so against the backdrop of impending disaster for a people who have ignored God and rebelled against him. But for those who trust in God and walk in his ways there is salvation. God will keep them safe under the shelter of his wing. And on that final day he *‘will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.’*

Keep trusting in God and walking in his ways and we will enjoy his protection from the storms of life. We can experience his peace as we trust in him.

Pray: thanking God for being our refuge and shelter.

Reflect: do I know the peace of God in the struggles of life?