

All can be well again - Easter Sunday

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[0 : 00] If you have a Bible, do have it open at Isaiah chapter 35 as we look at this together.! James was reminding us on Friday, if you were here then, about how much Jesus loved us to suffer an agonising death for us on the cross, taking our sins, taking our place so that we can be free.

And the minute you realise that Jesus isn't just some sort of symbolic hero or a great life example to follow, but that he came to save you and me from our mess, then you know why Good Friday is good, don't you?

The message of Easter Sunday for us today is that Jesus' love, the love that took him to the cross, did not die with him there. Hallelujah! Christ is risen. He's risen indeed, isn't he?

And because Christ is risen, there is a simple truth for us to enjoy today from Isaiah chapter 35, and it's this. All can be well again.

And in some ways, that's all I really want to say this morning. So if you're tired, if you can remember, Jesus' love for you didn't die on the cross with him, and all can be well again, then that's fine.

[1 : 27] I hope what follows is still helpful, but that's the main thing. We were reading in our passage, weren't we, about the desert and the parched land, verse 1. So let's just think about water a little bit.

Have you noticed how difficult it is to get kids to drink water these days? Have you noticed that? Boy, I have. And in fact, we could ask the question, well, how good are any of us at drinking water these days?

Because the doctors are constantly telling us, you know, you ought really to be drinking more. Which reminds me. Here we are. Mike, I'm particularly thinking of you as I drink this glass of water. Yeah, this is one of Mike's favourite things to do while he was here. Take a sip of water while he was preaching. But, you know, you look at water and you think, oh, it's so boring. It's so stable. And so simple. And so samey. So let's make it better. Should we make it better? Let's make it better.

[2 : 29] Okay, here we go. I have some whey powder here, some protein. This is what we really do. We get given the stuff of life and we add all kinds of things to it.

This isn't going to work, is it? Plastic packaging. Another thing that's wrong with the world. Here we go. We add all kinds of fun stuff to it. That looks good. Chocolatey. Chocolatey.

What else does our life need? Ginger. Our lives need gingering up. Bit of spice. There we go. Is that enough? Is that enough?

There's hardly anything in there. Somebody get me a knife. What else? What else? What else should we put in there? Hmm. What else do we need in life? Oh, I know. I know. What else is good in life?

Money. Money's good in life, isn't it? There we go. Put that in there. Yeah, put that in there. Yeah. Yeah. Great. What else do we need? What else? Life needs to be sweet, doesn't it?

[3 : 28] Easter time. There we go. Much tastier. What else do we need in life? You need a nice car. No. Everybody needs a nice car.

That will make life less boring, won't it? There we go. What else? It's a mini egg. What else? I don't know. What do we want in Farnham? We want nice houses.

No. Right, here's our house keys. There we go. In it goes. What is that? Okay. That's good. I'm not sure there's any... Ew. It's a lot of ginger.

It's a lot of ginger. One more thing, though. Everybody likes a nice phone, don't they? Is it going in? Is it going in? It's going in. It's gone. It's gone. There you go.

Yeah. Nice. Guys, all that stuff, as you can see, ends up soaking the water, the real stuff of life, until we end up with this grainy, gritty, undrinkable cocktail of stuff.

[4 : 37] And that's what we do, friends. We take the life that God has given us, and then we take things that seem good to us, and we cram our lives full of that stuff, because that's what we look to for hope and for happiness.

And it's not life-giving. It doesn't taste good. We take God's stuff instead of God. We love the things in life instead of the life that God offers us.

And we worship that. And even, actually, in the relatively healthy and wealthy West, we do that. Somehow, our lives seem to have become so discontented, vacant, boring, insipid, however you experience it, that we're chasing the next thing, the next biggest house, the next car, the next hobby, the next high, poisoning ourselves with the stuff that we consume, mouth, ears, eyes. As we burn up the world around us, and we busy ourselves with dismantling the good things that God has given us. Family, faith.

And we claim that instead we believe in science, or statistics, or sociology, or the secular enlightenment, you know, those good things.

[6 : 09] But the thing is, that science and sociology and all those things tell us that we shouldn't live this way. That it's not good for us. But we don't listen, do we?

So we don't really believe in that. That's the problem. Can you tell me, honestly, you don't have to answer out loud, were you more bothered by the water damage to the phone, or by the polluting of the water?

Which one bothered you more? And you see, that's the problem. We care more about the things in life than the life that God offers us.

So we are busy with the desertification of existence. With turning life into a desert full of stuff. Dethroning God. And all the while we're telling ourselves we've never been happier. That's it, isn't it? And that's what we've always been busy with.

[7 : 15] So if you were to turn back to chapter 34, a couple of pages back from where we read, here's what's happened to just one of the countries around Israel, which really stands for the rest of the world.

Chapter 34, verse 9. Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur. Her land will become blazing pitch. Verse 13.

Thorns will overrun her citadels, nettles and brambles her strongholds. She will become a haunt for jackals, a home for owls. We're turning our world, ourselves, into a wasteland.

And the consequence is in that passage that Hamish read for us so well earlier. 1 Peter 1. All people are like grass. And all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall. But the word of the Lord endures forever. That's quoting Isaiah chapter 40, not far from our passage. Saying, welcome to the wilderness that we've made, where we all fade like flowers.

[8 : 27] As the song goes, you can check in any time you like, but you can never leave. Or can you? Let's read verses 1 and 2 of our passage one more time.

The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom.

It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon, the tall cedars will be given to it. The splendor of Carmel, the green mountain. And Sharon, where the roses bloom.

They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. So here you have a word painting of a blooming field of hope in the desert.

A dead world full of new life. Crocuses growing out of the dust. Crocuses were beautiful this year, weren't they? Absolutely beautiful. What a picture.

[9 : 34] My wife has a t-shirt on it. With this on it. It's a Charlie Mackesy t-shirt. Don't know if you know who Charlie Mackesy is. He's an artist. And it says, in case you can't see the slide, love wins.

Is that just a fantasy? Because if death is the end, if we all end up in the dust in the desert, then love doesn't win, does it?

When the person who lights up our world goes, it's lights out. No crocuses. But back to verses 1 and 2.

The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus it will burst into bloom. Isn't that vision so compelling? Isn't that beautiful?

Isn't that what we want? But if that is just a fantasy, a kind of cruel joke, then why is it so powerful? Why is it so striking and attractive?

[10:42] Why do we want it to be true so much? Don't know if you've ever had your heart broken. I have. I was 16 and I was a bit of an idiot.

It doesn't have to be a romantic thing, does it? But when the voice you love, the one that has suddenly taken up all of the space in the middle of your heart, is gone, that's agony, isn't it? Love doesn't win in that moment. And when your heart was broken, if that's ever happened to you, when that happened, even though you knew it could never be, didn't you spend a considerable amount of time thinking, wishing, praying, I want it to be like it was.

I wish it was as it was before. Didn't you spend time hoping that person would come back? Why do we do that?

Why do we hope against all logic and reason for that person to change or for this relationship to be restored when, humanly speaking, we know it can't be?

[12:00] Why do we do that? Why do people go back to the same spot on holiday every year? Why do people go on the same walk to see the same view time after time?

It's to have again what we had before. Isn't it? Why do we keep working and praying for peace in our world when we know that all of history teaches us that human beings are so selfish that they are always going to keep having wars?

Why do we keep working and praying for it? Because we believe in something we've never seen.

Why do we keep trying to recapture what we looked like when we were young?

If you are young, just wait. It'll happen. Why do we listen to the same music we listened to when we were a teenager? Why do I have a 20-year-old t-shirt in my wardrobe?

Because we want it to be as it was. Don't we? Why do we visit the graves of our loved ones? Why do we speak to our parents or our friends, even our pets, after they've died?

[13:16] We know they're not there. Here's why. We do all these things because we secretly believe in the resurrection.

Despite it all, we believe it can be well again. We believe love will win. Even when relationships break down because of the brokenness and ugliness in our hearts.

Even when death breaks bonds between us in such a painful and permanent way. We secretly believe it can be well again.

Guys, if you believe we came from nothing and we're going to nothing, then why shouldn't this world be meaningless, tragic, and pointless?

The weird thing then is not that sad things happen, but that it bothers us. Right? If that's the way things are. I want to just show you a picture of a plant.

[14:27] This plant is called the Rose of Jericho. That's the Rose of Jericho. If you add to the Rose of Jericho water, the stuff of life, this is what it looks like.

And when you catch a glimpse of that resurrection beauty, like we see in this passage here, the idea that this world is all there is, a materialistic, godless explanation of life, it just becomes ridiculous, doesn't it?

When we catch a glimpse of something like this, it just doesn't match how we live. It doesn't match how we experience the world. Had some poetry last weekend.

Here's some more from Shelley. If winter comes, can spring be far behind? I'll give you a hundred more examples of how we secretly believe in the resurrection.

You believe in blossoms in the desert, don't you? Because we all secretly believe in the resurrection. It's the land of resurrection that is pictured here.

[15:47] Let's go back to verse 2 one more time. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. The splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord. The splendor of our God.

So how does that work? How can God's glory be seen? Well, the Bible tells us that we see God's glory in Jesus. Jesus reveals God to us, doesn't he?

And how can we see that if Jesus is dead? No, we see God's glory and we find hope in the face of the risen Lord Jesus.

And therefore, Jesus' message on Easter morning is that as he rises in the face of all of our loss, all of the liability that we carry around with us, in him it can be well again.

Look at verse 5 to 7. Here's a vision of that. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongues shout for joy.

[16 : 55] Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool. The thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

It will be renewed. It can be healed. It will be restored. It can be well again. And what's life worth without that hope? I was trying to think of a way to picture this for those of us who learn by looking rather than listening.

Here's what I came up with. Poppies growing in fields of death. Poppies in Flanders.

And of course there's poetry that goes with that image. Isn't there? Here we are. In Flanders field the poppies blow between the crosses row on row.

The cross. Yep, that's here as well in our passage because of course we need it. That's how we get to renewal. That's how we get to this resurrection. There is no resurrection without the cross, is there?

[18 : 04] Look at verse 4. Your God will come. He will come with vengeance. With divine retribution he will come to save you.

God comes with divine retribution in order to save us. How does that work? Well the answer is the cross, isn't it?

The cross is where God comes with divine retribution for our sins, lays it on Jesus and therefore saves us. Finally, for those of us who know we are believers in the resurrection, there is a road to joy.

We had a clue in verse 1 and 2. Do you see that? The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice. Verse 2. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

But then we learn more in verse 10. Those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

[19 : 24] That's the road of joy for those who trust in Jesus' resurrection. But there's more because the road to joy is a road to holiness. Did you see that when we read it? Verse 8.

And a highway will be there. It will be called the way of holiness. It will be for those who walk on that way. The unclean will not journey on it.

See, this way is only for those who walk that way. Did you get that? Anybody here walking in total holiness? Not me either.

The Bible tells us that anybody who claims to be holy enough to walk on God's royal road is kidding themselves. So who gets to walk there then? Look at verse 9.

Bottom. But only the redeemed will walk there and those the Lord has rescued will return. Only the redeemed will walk on the resurrection way.

[20 : 30] Those whom God has rescued. Now we're thinking, what's the way? Where's the way? If you know your Bibles, you know where I'm going.

John chapter 14 verse 6. Jesus answered, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

There is only one way of holiness and that's Jesus. Only Jesus has the credit to redeem us, to buy us back from drinking this for the rest of our lives.

Only Jesus can give you his perfect holiness so that you can walk rejoicing on the resurrection way. Only Jesus has come back to walk that way beside you.

The road to joy. Do you want to walk that road? Do you want to walk that road? Here's what we do. Again from Charlie Maxey.

[21 : 35] Follow Jesus. How does that work?

Well again back to the passage that Hamish read for us. 1 Peter 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

it's through faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus that we have hope reborn, that we walk on the resurrection way, that we can hope that all can be well again.

And there is no other hope like this. Only Jesus has come back from the dead. The founder of every other major religion, including atheism, is dead. Only Jesus is alive.

only Jesus can say, I am the resurrection and the life. I think some of us sitting here today have secretly known that for years.

[22 : 52] Come and live and walk in the light of that. Step onto the road to joy, onto the resurrection way. If we do, verse 10 is our future.

Look, they will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

If we entrust ourselves to the Lord Jesus, as we walk through the desert, we will see small blossoms along the way. I know some of you have seen that already this week. Some of you haven't. It will come.

As certainly as Jesus rose, it will come. If we believe this, we put our trust in Jesus and follow him on the resurrection way, here's what happens.

Verses 3 and 4. Strengthen the God.

[24 : 02] Our hands strengthened, our knees steadied, and our fearful hearts quieted, as we trust that the Lord Jesus will come. Amen.

Just pray briefly. Lord, we acknowledge that we're in many ways busy making our world a desert, and we confess our part in that, Lord.

We thank you so much for the vision of a desert bursting into bloom again. We thank you, Lord, that you were raised in order to make that vision a reality.

thank you that you invite us by your grace, because of your sacrifice, through your merits, to step on to the resurrection way with you. Please, will you strengthen weak hands, steady feeble knees this morning, comfort fearful hearts, and help us to trust in your redeeming grace.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.