

Isaiah 35

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[0 : 00] Isaiah 35, the entire chapter. And it reads, as such, draw near, O nations, to hear.

Okay, 35. Sorry, that was 34. The Lord wants us to hear. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of the labyrinth shall be given to it.

The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord. The majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong. Fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance. With the recompense of God, he will come and save you.

[1 : 07] Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened. The ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer. And the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool. And the thirsty ground springs of water. And the hunt jackals where they lie down.

The grass shall become reeds and rushes. And a highway shall be there. And it shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it.

It shall belong to those who walk on the way. Even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there. Nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it.

They shall not be found there. But the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing.

[2 : 09] Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy. And sorrow and sighing shall flee away. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Father, we come to you this morning.

And we understand that it's only in your light do we see light. And so, Father, would you illuminate your word? Would you empower your mouth? Peace.

May your light shine upon us for your purposes and for your glory. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Sighing.

That may be an appropriate word as this calendar year expires. For many of us, whether it be mentally or physically, the sigh was our repeated response to these past nine months.

[3 : 34] Sorrow, the emotion that is the proper feeling to those who lose, or for those who grieve the loss of life, the undoing of community, the unraveling of the very way of life.

Perhaps you're like me, and memories of last year, what last year was like, are held in comparison to what is permissible this year. We simply want those days restored.

We're left weak, feeble, anxious, and fearful. Sighing and sorrow, weakness, feebleness, anxiety, and fear.

All mentioned in the 35th chapter of Isaiah. Our text this morning carries the same sentiment of 2020. Sorrow and sighing.

Weak, feeble, anxious, and fearful. Sure, God's people were not amidst a pandemic. Instead, they're languishing in exile.

[4 : 44] They likewise had distant memories of family gatherings and holiday celebrations. And those memories were fading.

They were living in days that needed to be accelerated, propelled forward. They were people, whom the psalmist writes, who can no longer sing, for they lived in a foreign land.

They were mute in that sense. How could they sing when their suffering was so severe? The people were displaced, enslaved, trodden upon by a foreign power.

They were living the horrors of captivity. What God did for them through Moses, what God did for them through Moses, with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the people needed God to do again. The people needed God to show up and deliver them again. They needed God to show up and create an exit from their exile.

[5 : 51] They needed God to show up and lead them in a new exodus. And this morning, I want my aim to be very clear. Everything changes when God shows up.

Everything changes when God shows up. And there's three images that emerged from our text this morning that I'm going to hold to the forefront. When God shows up, the desert sings. When God shows up, the lame man leaps. When God shows up. The ransomed return home. Everything changes when God shows up. Chapter 35 is so striking because of how it's set up by the 34th chapter.

And maybe Milton's right. Maybe God wanted us to hear that chapter. But chapter 34 ends with this picture of dry desolation.

[7 : 00] It's an abandoned desert inhabited only by wild animals pervading with thorns and thistles. The land has been ravaged by fire.

The streams have been turned into pitch. The soil into sulfur. It's unquenchable destruction. Verses 8, chapter 34, verses 8 to 10.

It's smoke. The smoke from the land goes up forever. There are no people in the 34th chapter because the land is uninhabitable.

It's the stereotypical Hollywood image. The vulture sitting on a tree with no leaves. Jackals and hyenas roaming the land awaiting for life to expire so that they can continue their ravenous and scavenging ways.

It's haunting to say the least. The picture in chapter 34 is fruitless, futile, fearful. It is a picture of death.

[8 : 09] And so when we open up to the 35th chapter, we're surprised. We're surprised because the land bursts forth in song.

The 34th chapter has given us this image of a curse. And if you're familiar with your Bible, you're well aware that the natural world fell under God's judgment in Genesis chapter 3.

The goodness of creation took a drastic turn. The land, its fruitfulness was diminished. Its abundance was withheld. The blossoming flowers were accompanied by thorns and thistles. What was once harmonious between creation and creature had been disrupted. Creation was once an ally. And it seems beginning in Genesis chapter 3, creation had become a foe. when humans were to tend it. Instead, they poorly stewarded it. And it's seen entering chapter 35 as this curse is amplified to its worst.

[9 : 20] And when we come to the opening verses of chapter 35, we're so surprised because there it is. The landscape that embodies sadness has all of a sudden been transformed to gladness.

the fruitless land is now blossoming twofold in verses 1 and 2. It's blossoming abundantly. The desert has broken forth into joyous song.

That which was debased, decimated, and deserted is now majestic and glorious. There is some grand reversal that takes place. What was once cursed is liberated.

What was once a picture of death is now filled with life? Creation's curse is reversed. When God shows up, death is turned into life.

For those of us who admire nature and have given our, you know, there are those of us who admire nature. There are many of us, of those in our congregation, who have given themselves to the study of nature.

[10 : 30] we're held in awe by Kilimanjaro, Fuji, Everest, Rainier, whether it be the Amazonian rainforests or the subsequent deserts or the Scandinavian fjords, we stand in awe of their majesty.

Universities create disciplines. Zoology, geology, botany, astronomy, marine biology. Why? All of those are human attempts to capture what God has created.

And we're given the faculties to do so, to explore them and to study them for in so doing we exemplify the beauty and the glory of her creator. We study them really because they're beyond our comprehension.

They exceed us. They're greater than us. They're things that we simply cannot master. They're things we cannot make up. We simply marvel.

When we admit it, we are subservient to nature as much as we've tried to manipulate creation. We build up levees and dams to stop water.

[11 : 46] We build up canals and channels to move water. We launch things into the sky praying for water. nature. We've tried to do whatever we can to control creation.

And in the end, we're subservient to it. Natural disasters bear down upon us and leave us helpless. And we begin to wonder if nature is our great enemy. who could subdue the hurricane, the flash flood, or the trembling earth.

Isaiah tells us when God shows up, he can and he will. When God shows up, the desert sings. The curse of creation is reversed. Secondly, when God shows up, the lame leap. the lame leap. As I mentioned before, the people of God are in exile.

[12 : 52] And if you're unfamiliar with the Bible story, the exile was a period in Israel's history. After they had become a monarchy, an established nation, they were flourishing and thriving.

But sadly, because of their rebellion against God, God allows foreign countries to capture them and to carry them out from their land.

In exile, one can only imagine the horrific atrocities they would experience. Loved ones torn from one another, enduring the trauma of war and the crushing hope or the crushing of any hopeful reemergence from the aftermath.

And it is in this circumstance that Isaiah's words come forth. The people are instructed in verse three to strengthen their weak hands, to make firm their feeble knees, to say to one another, those who are anxious, be strong and fear not.

Why? Why? Well, it tells us there, behold, your God comes.

[14 : 07] He will come and save you. Isaiah needs the people to know that God would show up. He wouldn't abandon or forsake, forget or neglect or despise.

They were his treasured possession. He would show. He would come. The Most High would arrive. And when he arrives, he won't show up passively. Instead, he arrives with righteous indignation, with vengeance, the fourth verse tells us, with recompense, that he will give to Israel's oppressors what they deserve.

He would crush their foes. He would save them. But the power display would not only crush the enemies of Israel, but God's arrival would have a transformative effect on the people of Israel, the physically impaired.

See, it's sensible that God would save people from their enemies. But the question that plagued me is, why does it matter the blind see, or the lame leap, or the mute sing, or the deaf hear?

Why does it matter that the physically handicapped are transformed? Well, it matters because of this. God is not only concerned with extinguishing the external foes.

[15 : 38] on his people. He is also concerned with transforming the internal foes that crush his people.

The external foes are certainly daunting, but you, if you're like me, but you, if you're like me at all, it's the foes on the inside that are devastating and insurmountable.

No one restores sight. No one unstops the ear. No one empowers legs to leap. only God does this. See, if God was only correcting that which was on the outside, it would only be a partial salvation. He needs to correct what's on the inside.

Isaiah comes to declare that when God shows up, our internal condition is transformed, or better put, our human condition is restored to what was lost and even. We're once again made whole, complete, full.

[16 : 49] The original sin that stripped us of our dignity and crippled us has now been reversed. We are made in the image of God, though marred at the fall, we will one day manifest His image in full.

See, it's easy for us, it's easy for me to say, God, you need to come and you need to stomp out the corruption and politics, you need to come and fix the injustice of society, you need to come and fix the inequity of economics.

I'm glad to tell you that God will, but it's much harder to say, God, I need you to come in here and fix this pride issue that I have.

I need you to come in here and drive out the anger that I have or the rage that I have. God, I need you to come in here and open my blind eyes and cause me to stand on my two feet and open my ears that I might hear.

When God shows up, the transformation will be full internally and outwardly. His deliverance will be absolute and thorough.

[18 : 09] When God shows up. And this is the supreme promise of the Bible, is it not? This is the phrase that really, I can make an argument, holds your Bible together.

This is what you need to know, that in every circumstance, at all times and in all places, God will come and God will show up.

This is the centerpiece of the Bible. How do I know God has shown up? Well, Isaiah gives us this example. It's indicative, it's indicated by the fact that God shows up when blind people start seeing, when lame people start walking, when new people start singing.

This is when God shows up. Interestingly, the New Testament picks up on this. The gospel writer Matthew records this from us.

Behind prison walls, there sat John the Baptist. And he hears stories about this man, this miracle worker.

[19 : 17] And so John the Baptist calls his disciples to him and says, hey, disciples, go run and go ask this man, this miracle working man, is he the expectation of our nation or are we waiting for someone else?

And so John the Baptist disciples go and they approach this man and they say, hey, are we looking for you or are we looking for someone else? Is God showing up in you or are we looking for God somewhere else?

And the man replied, we'll go back and tell John this, to the blind see, the deaf hear, the leper are cleansed, the lame are walking.

pain. And those came from the very mouth of Jesus. What Jesus was saying that moment was, God has come and everything will be different.

He was reassuring John that in Jesus, God had showed up and humanity's condition was being restored. This is the Christmas message.

[20 : 30] God has come to his people. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. When God shows up, the human condition is restored.

The lame are found leaping. And lastly, when God shows up, the ransom return. beginning in verse 8, the lame man is no longer leaping.

He is now walking in a large mass and a big company of people. He's walking on a highway, a newly constructed highway, a new road, set apart from all other roads.

And this highway is distinctive. It has a special name. It's not called the Kennedy. It's not called the Edens. It's not called the Eisenhower. The signpost reads simply the way of holiness.

It's named after the one who constructed it, namely the one who is most holy, the Lord Most High. It describes, the name describes those who walk in it, those who are holy, morally blameless and set apart.

[21 : 44] And there's a single destination. It's not like our tollway with multiple exits. There's only one stop. one end. You can't get off it.

You can't get on it. One destination called the holy city of Zion. And I want to make two observations that need to be made about this road, and I've alluded to them already.

You need to know the security on this road. It's a secure road. The ESV translates it in this way in verse 8.

It shall belong to those who walk on the way, and even if they are fools, they can't get lost.

You may be directionally challenged. It doesn't matter on this road. Your iPhone battery may have died, and you may not have access to the global positioning satellite.

[22 : 47] You won't get lost on this road. You cannot walk off this road. It is so secure. Catch this.

Even your personal foolishness can't get you off of it. You simply cannot wander off.

It is that secure. It is so secure that there are no nothing intrusive will impede the road.

There are no potholes on this road. There are no landmines on this road. There are no obstacles on this road. Nothing will wander into the road.

There are no diseases on this road. There is no sickness on this road. There is no road rage on this road. There is nothing picking people off this path.

[23 : 46] Whether they be predatorial animals or outside opposition, there are no threats on this road. It is the greater exodus. The first migration out of Egypt was a million strong and there was loss along the way.

You may know this. As Israel is coming out of the promised land, you and I picture, oh, no foes, nothing, no hindrances. Well, it's interesting because Deuteronomy chapter 25 tells us that there were, that the million were coming out of Egypt and there were the Amalekites standing in the back. And the Bible tells us that as Israel got faint and weary and those who lagged behind, the Amalekites would pick off the helpless and the vulnerable.

vulnerable. It's not that. It's a greater exodus. It's a better exodus. It's a new exodus. It not only speaks of Israel walking out of Assyria and Babylon, it speaks of a great exodus that is greater than the one from Egypt, from Assyria, from Babylon, from Persia.

It speaks of an exodus that eclipses all of them. You see, it's a picture of you and I really walking. We're walking, the people of God walking back to the land of God, for the way has now been reopened.

[25 : 28] Notice the security of the road. Secondly, notice the exclusivity of the road. The road has exclusive access.

The road belongs solely and exclusively to those the text has described as redeemed and ransomed. The language conveys a sense of acquisition, of purchase.

Those that walk on this road are an acquired people. They're an acquired people. The toll for the road has somehow been paid for.

Perhaps you like me have this little white block in your car called the Illinois I-Pass. It's loaded with my personal funds and even every time I walk, I drive through one of those barriers or drive underneath those scanners, they start taking money from you.

And if you drive from here to New York you'll find it costs a lot. It's almost like a tollway the whole way. But access on this highway likewise appears to have required a toll.

[26 : 43] However, this toll has been paid for those who walk on it have been ransomed and redeemed.

That word, those two words emerge, they have biblical origins also from the Exodus. The ransom picture comes from Exodus chapter 4 where God approaches Moses and he says, Moses, you need to go to Pharaoh and here's the deal.

Let my people go. If you fail to let my people go, Pharaoh, it will be your son for my son, my firstborn Israel. And that's what happened.

The ransom price for the freedom of Israel was the life of Pharaoh's firstborn. And Israel carried forth this tradition, this idea of being redeemed for God.

Therefore, the firstborns, the male firstborns, whether animals, livestock, or people, had a purchase price, a redemption price. Numbers 18 tells us that the purchase price, the redemption price for the firstborn male in a family was five shekels.

[28 : 01] They retained this in their national identity. They were a redeemed people, a ransomed people. And as you begin to see this picture come into focus, there is this highway that is reopening for returnees.

The road belongs exclusively to those who have had their toll paid. By whom? Well, if you were to read Isaiah later on, you'll find that the Lord himself is the redeemer.

He is the redeemer of his people. He is the one who purchases them. He is the one who ransoms them. He is the one who acquires them. To those who walk on this road, those who walk on this road are redeemed and ransomed.

At what cost? At the cost. of Christmas. The toll price on this road, this highway, is the cost of God's first born.

The construction cost, the fashioning of this road, cost the life of his son. The security detail required, hired to secure this road, was made by the breath, the final breath, of his beloved son.

[29 : 18] The everlasting joy that crowns the entire company that walks on this road, was secured through the sacrificial suffering of the son.

The cost of Christmas made this road. God shows up and everything changes.

Creation's curse is reversed. The human condition is restored. Access to God is reopened. God shows up and the desert sings. God shows up and the lame man leaps.

God shows up and the ransomed! return. God shows up and joy is left in his wake. You caught that. Did you not? That the plants are rejoicing, are singing. The mute are singing for joy.

[30 : 20] The whole company walking along this road are wearing crowns of everlasting joy. Why? Because 2020 is gone.

Sorrow and sighing. The picture is so radical. Sorrow and sighing are running away. It's not you and I driving them away.

It's not us pushing them away. It's not us coming up with some temporal joy to replace that so we don't sorrow and sigh. When God shows up, sorrow and sigh run.

The song is so appropriate. Joy to the world. God, the Lord has come. Let us receive our King. Let us receive our King. And Isaac Watts, I think, is one of the writers. You could correct me if I'm wrong, but he knows, Isaiah 35, heaven and nature sing.

[31 : 29] whether while fields, floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy.

Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat, repeat the sounding joy. That's my prayer, our prayer for you.

Christmas 2020. God has come and everything changes. Father, we thank you for this morning.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus. God showed up and all things have changed. Father, we pray, Lord, that we know that this reality has already unleashed in the course of human history.

That our Bibles record lame men dancing, blind men seeing, mute men singing. And we pray that would be true of us, that our hearts would be those that testify to the fact that I once was blind but now I see.

[32 : 48] I once was crippled but now I walk. I once had no song but now I do. Fill us with this joy, exceeding joy, everlasting joy, we pray.

Amen.