

12/15/2019 - Isaiah 35

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Preacher: Benjie Slaton

- [0 : 0 0] The following sermon is from Grace and Peace Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Grace and Peace is a new church that exists for the glory of God and the good of the northeast suburbs of Hamilton Place, Collegedale, and Udayton.
- You can find help more by visiting gracepeacechurch.org. We've been looking at a few passages from Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah, in this Advent season, and we're going to look at one more passage today from Isaiah 35.
- So hear God's word as I read to you from Isaiah 35. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus, and it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.
- The glory of Lebanon 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.
- 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 : 1 3] Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and 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. In the haunt of jackals where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes and a highway shall be there.
- 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 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.
- Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
- [2 : 1 6] Amen. This is God's word. Let me pray for us. Our God, we pray that you would give us a greater vision of you, of your work in this world and of your son, our savior, Jesus.
- Renew our hearts. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.
- Amen. Isaiah, the prophet, seems to really like Lebanon, that little bitty country that's just north of Israel.
- He talked about Lebanon last week, and Lebanon makes a cameo appearance in our passage this week. For whatever reason, Isaiah likes to bring up this little country. Lebanon and Israel were frenemies.
- You know, they at times cooperated together and got along and worked together. And at times they fought like children. You may not know this, but my family is Lebanese.

[3 : 17] My mother's whole side is from Lebanon, and our family has this really deeply ingrained immigrant identity. In fact, if you've seen the movie, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, anybody?

That's essentially my family. Really, it's striking and it's kind of weird. And there's all kinds of, I could tell a lot of stories, and there's all kinds of family lore.

You know, my grandparents would call it, you know, from the old country. The lore about the beauty of the people and the places in Lebanon. Lebanon. You know, there are the, if you've ever seen pictures, there's the coastal beaches and the warm Mediterranean waters that come up.

There's these soaring mountains just off inland from the coast that are beautiful. And for generations, those mountains were filled with these huge cedar forests, these lush and lively forests.

And for many years, this was a, Lebanon was seen as kind of this sophisticated, wealthy, desirable place for people to go.

[4 : 24] In fact, Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, was a destination for Europeans for vacations for years. The French have a huge influence in Lebanon.

And then in 1975, there was a civil war. And all of that beauty, all of that class, all of that wealth, essentially was lost in this civil war.

It is a glorious place that's now essentially in ruins. It's never really recovered from that war for over 40 years ago. And it's beauty, the beauty of the country is in ruins.

It's a shadow of its former self. And I think it's really, truly one of my great disappointments because of how special this place is for my family. I have wanted to go there. I've wanted to visit there.

I've wanted to see this. And it's one of my great disappointments that this place that has such profound glory to it is a place of ruins. You know, beautiful things in the world shouldn't get ruined like that.

[5 : 29] Marriages shouldn't get ruined because of one person's persistent sinful decisions. But they do. The innocence of children shouldn't be stolen by abuse.

But it is. Neighborhoods and communities shouldn't be destroyed because of, they shouldn't be ruined by poverty and violence and joblessness.

But they are. All around us, there are beautiful, wonderful things that have been ruined because of sin in this world. And that's the world we live in.

We live in this world of ruin. And Isaiah, for 35 chapters, Isaiah has been telling the people of Israel, you are about to get ruined. There's actually ruin underneath, but it's about to come in the form of Babylon.

Babylon is coming. Unless you repent, unless you turn away, this destruction, this ruin is coming. And Isaiah can see it as clear as day. And he's telling the people, you need to avoid this.

[6 : 34] And so finally, he's turned his attention away from proclaiming the coming ruin to saying, okay, how is it that we can have some hope in the midst of a world that is ruined?

How is it that you can find hope in the midst of a world that's ruined? And I think that is something that is as applicable for us as it was for them in Isaiah's day.

How in the world do we find hope in the midst of our lives that feel ruined and a world that feels ruined so much of the time? Where do we find it? Well, this passage has two particular things to help us.

They're not the only two things that we could say, but there are at least two of them. And the first one is you have to be willing to stiffen your resolve in a world of ruin. You have to be willing to stiffen your resolve.

The second thing is you have to be certain of where your hope lies. You have to be certain of where your hope lies. So stiffen your resolve, certain of where your hope lies. That's how we find hope in a world of ruin.

[7 : 36] So this is a prophetic poem. It's actually really cool if you get into kind of the details of it. There's a lot of things going on. But fundamentally, this is broken up into two sections, two halves.

You start in verse 1 and you get the wilderness and the dry land will be glad. The desert will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. The wilderness and the desert are the image there.

And then in the second half of verse 6, if you look down there, you get a repetition. This is the second half and it's repeated. Four, meaning a transition, four waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

You see that wilderness and desert are the beginning of the two halves of this passage. And Isaiah is using these images of the wilderness and the desert to talk about the spiritual ruin of the people of Israel.

Their interior lives are like deserts. They're like wastelands spiritually. They have no spiritual life left in them. And yet, the promise is that in the middle of the desert and the wasteland, transformation is going to come in the form of water.

[8 : 50] Rain is going to come on the desert and the wilderness. And he says it twice because he wants you to get the point. That God is going by His presence and His Spirit.

His Spirit is pictured as rain, fresh rain, is going to come. And new life is going to be born in a place where there was only desert wasteland. God is going to bring new life.

That's the image. That's the idea. So what is that going to look like? What is it going to look like to stiffen your resolve in this way? Well, when He comes and brings new life, look at verse 2.

It's going to blossom. So the desert will rejoice. It will blossom like the crocus. It will blossom abundantly. It will rejoice with joy and singing. There will be joy and celebration.

And then He talks about the glory of Lebanon will be given to it. The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. What He's doing there is He's taking physical, geographical, real locations that the people would know.

[9 : 59] These were like, you know, you would go to Mount Carmel because it was big and majestic. Lebanon had beauty. And so He's saying in the same way that you see the beauty of these geographic places, God is going to bring His beauty back to you spiritually.

They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. You'll see His glory among you. You will become a beautiful people again.

And then He says this, that God's presence will strengthen the weak hands. Hands, just a metaphor for our abilities.

Our ability to follow Him and obey and do things. It will make firm the feeble knees. Isn't that a great image? Feeble knees. Knees that don't hold you up.

You're not stable on your feet. He's going to make you stable again. Say to those who have an anxious heart. The anxious heart that has no resolve.

[11 : 00] That has no ability to persevere because it's fearful. What does He say? He says, be strong. Fear not. Behold, your God will come.

He will come and save you. That sounds a lot like what Joshua said to the people of Israel as they were entering into the promised land. Do you remember what Joshua said? He said, be strong and courageous.

Do not fear for the Lord is with you. The first thing that Isaiah is wanting the people of Israel to do is to stop and take a breath. And to remember that God is with them.

I know it's fearful, he's saying. I know it's scary. I know you feel overwhelmed by the ruin in your own life and in the community around you. You feel the ruin even in the church.

Stop and take a breath. God is with you. He is coming. In the passage that Pete read for us earlier, it's a fascinating passage.

[12 : 03] It's about John the Baptist, right? John the Baptist, he's seen Jesus. He's watched Jesus do some miracles. He's heard Jesus' teaching. And yet, Jesus healed some people, but Jesus didn't heal everybody.

Have you ever thought about that? Jesus seemed to do a lot of things for a lot of people, but he didn't heal everybody. There were people that walked away from Jesus' presence.

Maybe people who even touched his cloak, like the woman who was bleeding, and they weren't healed. And John's wrestling with this. Why do you do this with some people and not with other people?

What's going on? And so he sends messengers to Jesus. John is doubting. He needs to be reassured. And Jesus says, here's what I want you to do. I want you to tell John what you see.

And then Jesus paraphrases this passage. He paraphrases Isaiah. Look at verse 5 and 6. He says, Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

[13 : 03] Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. What is Jesus communicating to John? Here's what he's saying.

He's saying to John and to all of us that the decisive moment has come. The decisive moment in the history of the world is here. And you see it because of the signs that he's doing.

You see it because of the way that Jesus is fulfilling everything that was promised. Jesus is giving us a glimpse of what his ultimate kingdom will be like.

And yet, its true and full impact is still hidden. Its fullness is still concealed. Even from John.

And it's still that way. Jesus has come. The decisive moment has happened. And yet we don't see the fullness of it. God's kingdom has been established.

[14 : 03] And we don't see its full power yet. You remember how Jesus talked about his kingdom? His kingdom was like a mustard seed. Tiny. You could hardly hold it in your hand.

It would just fall out. But when it's planted, when you cultivate the ground, when you tend that seed, when you have a resolve to see it flourish, what does it do?

It grows up and it becomes a tree. The kind of tree that's the biggest in the forest and the birds land in it. What Jesus is saying is that the tiny signs from his ministry and that we see even in our midst among us, the tiny signs of God's presence point to the day that Jesus will return and will take all power into himself.

The tiny signs give us a taste of that future. And so we stiffen our resolve. We get a taste now.

And those tastes give us more. Jesus says those tastes will satisfy us. We were watching the new Annie movie at our house last night. I don't know if y'all have seen the new one.

[15 : 12] But it's great. You should watch it. But Cameron Diaz is Miss Hannigan. And at one point, here's what Miss Hannigan says. She says, the worst thing in the world you can get is a little taste of something good because it never lasts.

And from then on, all you can taste is not that taste. Which I think is hilarious. Is not that taste. She's saying, if you just get a taste of something good, it's never going to last.

But what Jesus... And I think that's how many people think about good things in the world. That the good stuff never lasts. But what Jesus is saying is, when you taste what I'm giving you, when you get a little taste of it, you taste the kingdom.

And it strengthens you. And you're able to persevere in a new way. You know, I think we need to think about this as a church.

It's true for us. I mean, we as a church are off to a fantastic start. I mean, grace and peace, we've been around for three months now. Woo-hoo! Three months! And it's a fantastic start.

[16:18] I am delighted. But, we haven't changed the world yet. There's a lot of people that have come through that haven't come back. We could get discouraged very easily about all the things that we don't yet see happening in our church that we want to happen.

We've got a lot of room for growth here. We've got a lot that we want to see God do. And that's part of why I was so proud of each one of you. Last week, we had our Christmas party.

And you guys invited so many people. We had like over 20 people, maybe even 25 people, who were disconnected, not just from our church, but from Jesus' church, who came to our Christmas party and had the opportunity to connect to grace and peace, as well as to connect to Jesus.

And that's because you took a risk in inviting them. You stepped out. You took a taste of Jesus' kingdom come in your relationships, and you stepped out and you leaned in faith into those relationships.

And you got a taste of what the kingdom tastes like. And it's really good. It's really fun. I thought last Sunday night was so fun, and it gave me a glimpse of where we as a church are headed.

[17:44] You know, we need, but we need to strengthen our resolve if we are going to persevere in the midst of the difficult challenges that we have.

You know, and that strength probably needs to extend to the rest of your life as well, not just to our church. You know, some of you need to stiffen your resolve to continue in hard and seemingly ruinous relationships where it seems like nothing profitable is happening, and yet you are continuing to come back again and again and again to those difficult people with faithfulness and with grace and with mercy and with intentionality.

And you need to be stiffened in your resolve. Some of you need to be strengthened in your resolve to continue to confront indwelling sin in your own life. Those sins that continue to come back again and again and again, and you need to have the resolve to push against them.

Some of you need a resolve to just be more committed to following Jesus. Maybe a Bible reading program is what you need.

Maybe you need to commit more deeply to grace and peace. We want you to be here. You're welcome to let this be your place to strengthen your resolve because stiffening our resolve in a world of ruin is what God has for you.

[19:07] That's what this passage is saying, is that His message to you, if you come back to Jesus and to His message, it's going to strengthen you. It's going to strengthen your resolve to keep going.

That's the first thing. Stiffen our resolve. The second thing is we need to be certain of where our hope comes from. Certain of where our hope comes from. So again, in the second half of verse 6, you have that language of the desert and the wilderness again.

It's being transformed into a pleasant place with fresh water. Verse 7, Isn't that a great image?

The burning sand? The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. In the haunt of jackals where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

You know, the desert is going to become a pool of water where animals congregate and plants grow. There's a new ecosystem there.

[20 : 10] It's a place of life and vitality. You know, if you feel like parts of your life are in ruins, and they're lifeless, and they lack vitality, you need to hear Isaiah's words that that is not God's vision for your life.

That is not what God has called you to. God has called you to a life of vitality, a life full of life. His vision for you is to not be satisfied with lifelessness.

See, that's one of the images that Isaiah gives. He's given us three images here, three visions. The first one is the pool that I just read.

There are two more that are coming. But the reason he does this is he wants to capture your imagination. What Isaiah is doing is he's giving you three images that hopefully will shape for you what you are to expect from God.

If you live a life of hopefulness in God, what will your life eventually come to look like? And we need these visions. We need our imaginations. Because God is shaping the way that we follow him by shaping our imagination, what we hope for.

[21 : 27] You ought to be hoping for a life of vitality, of fruitfulness, like a pool of water. The second one is in verse 8.

So the first image was a pool.

The second image is this highway. It actually fits with what the apostle John, or what was said of John, a messenger. What was a highway?

At this time, what they would do is they would actually move dirt and make these roads. They'd build them up higher than the surrounding land. And they would put the road on top of them.

And the reason for that was two reasons. Number one, it helped with drainage, so it didn't get muddy when it rained. But the second reason was that you were high up, so visibility was helped.

[22 : 35] You could see when danger was coming. You could see the danger from people, enemies. You could also see the danger from wild animals. And what Isaiah is doing is he's giving us an image that there is this highway, that being a person who is certain of their hope, coming from God is like walking on this highway.

He doesn't tell us where the highway is going yet, but he does tell us who is on the highway. Did you catch this? There are two kinds of people on the highway. There are the redeemed of the Lord, God's people, and then there are the unclean.

The unclean shall not pass over it. What does he mean by the unclean? Well, he's not talking about the people who are just not part of the church. You know, the outsiders. That's not what he's talking about.

He's talking about people who are inside. They are God's people, and yet they're unclean. Who's that? Those are the people who call themselves Israelites.

They are part of the people of God, and yet they are not participating in the religious system, in the sacrificial system, and they are ritually unclean. They're people who call themselves God's people, and yet do not participate with God's people, and they're the ones who are excluded.

[24 : 01] We need to settle here for a minute. We live in the Bible Belt, in the suburbs of the buckle of the Bible Belt. This is a place where when I meet people and I tell them a pastor, the very first thing that people do is they list off their spiritual resume.

They tell me where they go to church, what Bible studies they're involved in, you know, what denomination they grew up in. That's the first thing people tell me here, almost all the time. Because people feel like they want to identify as God's people, whether or not they actually participate in the things of God's people.

Because you and I both know dozens of people who will tell you their spiritual resume and talk about being a Christian all day long, and yet they haven't darkened the door of the church in months or years and maybe decades.

And what Isaiah is saying is, those are going to be the people without a certainty of hope.

They're the people who are excluded from that highway of God's presence, of God's power. They are the people who choose not to participate with God's people.

[25 : 20] And there's a tragedy there. You know, if you are somebody who has deeply struggled with a certainty of God's hope, perhaps the problem for you is a lack of participation with God's people.

So those are two images, a pool of water, where there's a thriving ecosystem, a highway with God's people on it. And then the third image here at the end is verse 10.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy.

Sorrow and sighing shall flee away. The redeemed people of verse 9 have now become the ransomed people in verse 10. Isaiah loves this language.

It actually comes from an Old Testament tradition. You may be aware of this or maybe not. But that word redeemed comes from this Old Testament tradition called the kinsman redeemer. And what that meant was, was that if a family ended up in a situation, in a bad situation, this happens in the book of Ruth, with Ruth and Boaz, if you ever wanted to see this in action, when a family finds themselves in distress, maybe they've lost their property because of a foolish decision or famine or something, or there is, an injustice has been committed against them, or there is some sort of tragedy or an untimely death in their family, well, when that happens, then their nearest relative, a cousin, an uncle, something like that, their nearest relative would have the responsibility and often the privilege of to right those wrongs and to take responsibility for his family, to take responsibility for his relatives in their distress.

[27 : 14] And so when that relative takes responsibility, it is said that he redeems them, that he ransoms them out of their trouble. He is their redeemer.

That's where that word comes from. And so the image here in verse 10 is of these desperate people who have been redeemed, they've been saved from their distress, and they're walking home on this highway, and they're singing songs of deliverance.

They're like prisoners relieved from slavery. They're joyful and they're glad all because of what this redeemer has done for them. It's a beautiful picture, really. It's a picture of people who have been freed from the ruin around their lives, and they now have a certainty of hope, and they are progressing forward towards the ultimate realization and fulfillment of that hope.

Look at the very end. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Man, don't you want a day that you don't sigh and you don't have sorrow?

For some of you, the sorrow and the sighing has been there for so long, you can't even imagine a day without it. This season in people's lives brings up this deep sadness for the people they've lost, for the alienation they feel from others, the loneliness, the anxiety, the fact that they can't meet everybody's expectations.

[28 : 48] They feel inadequate. And what Isaiah is holding forth is this picture that life doesn't have to look that way, that we can live as people who have a certainty of hope in the midst of a world that is filled with ruin all around us.

And that certainty of hope comes from our redeemer, from the one that we have seen has come into the world. Jesus, the fulfillment of this passage has come to provide you with a certainty of hope even if things are ruined around you.

Think about it. This vision of the redeemed walking back. Their world hasn't been fixed. They have not arrived. Wherever that road is going, they haven't gotten there yet.

They might still be wearing their rags of slavery. They might not have enough to eat. Their problems might still be multiplied and yet their perspective is one of joy and one of gladness and one of perseverance and determination.

It's hope. See, this is what it looks like to be a people who live in a world of ruin and yet live with the confidence of being God's children.

[30 : 10] and you are invited into it. See, this is what Advent is all about. Advent is the moment, is those weeks where we stop what we're doing and we look for our redeemer.

We look for Christ's return. We know He's returned once and we know He will return again and in this present moment right now as we sit in the midst of ruins, we look again for Him.

We turn our attention to Him and when we do, we find the gifts that He's promised to us.

Look for Him. Okay, let me stop. Let me pray for us. Our Father, thank You that You give us passages like Isaiah who help us to see, to see You more clearly, to see the way that You are bringing the taste of heaven into this world and we pray now that You would give us a taste.

Strengthen us. Give us hope, we pray. Amen. Amen.