

SUMMER 1 - In Whom Shall We Trust?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 January 1999

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00]

.

.

.

.

[1:06]

.

.

.

.

[2:08] . . intervention at the end, where we are to wait for it. It may be that God intervenes here and now to restore the balance, so to speak, but it seems to me that more often than not through the Bible, God's balance is going to be restored at the end. That's not to say he doesn't act now, but it seems to me that the weight of evidence is for the Christian to look forward with anticipation to the end when God will correct the scales, so to speak, of the righteous and the wicked. So therefore, this passage that we're looking at tonight, along with many others, anticipates God's ultimate intervention to correct the balance, to exalt the lowly and the righteous and to bring down the wicked, the proud and the deceitful. And therefore, God's people in that situation are encouraged to persevere in faith, to trust that God will fulfil his promises, bless the righteous and judge the wicked in his time at the end. And we are to have persevering faith. That is faith that lasts day by day, despite the evidence around us, so to speak, looking for, longing for and anticipating that final day of God correcting the balance. When that day comes, that decisive day of God's intervention, then God will bring about a great reversal.

And that's one of the themes of Isaiah, is the great reversal. In chapter 2, a chapter that we looked at here at Holy Trinity a few months ago now in the evening service, we saw then the anticipation that Isaiah had of a day when God would bring down the arrogant, the proud, the haughty, and lift up and exalt the lowly. The lowly, not just being the poor, physically speaking, but rather those who humbly and faithfully trust in God, compared to the arrogant and haughty who trust in themselves and seek to exercise their own control over the world. God one day would bring about the great reversal, where the high and exalted in this life will be brought down and the lowly of this life, those who depend upon God will be exalted by God. That's the reversal. And it runs throughout Isaiah from beginning to end. And the Christians or the people, the believers of God are called to wait and trust and anticipate that day. And in the meantime, make sure they are the humble believing rather than the self-righteous, arrogant and haughty. But of course, it's not just a theme in Isaiah, is it? It's a theme from beginning to end of the Bible. It's a theme in Mary's song in Luke 1, when Mary announces and sings a song about the Jesus who is about to be born. One of the things he's going to do is to bring down the proud in their conceit or scatter the proud in their conceit and lift up the lowly. And it's there, of course, in 1 Peter and James and various other places throughout the Bible as well. God is bringing about a great reversal and we, his people, are called to anticipate and wait for and long for that day when he brings that about.

Now, the situation of the prophet Isaiah is the 8th century BC. That's the 700s BC, a long time ago, I admit. But we learn important lessons from this period.

The people of God then comprised two joint sort of neighbouring nations, Judah and Israel in the north. And predominantly, Isaiah is speaking to the people of Judah around Jerusalem. The nation had sort of divided after Solomon died 200 years or so before Isaiah. And those two nations, though

they're brother nations, actually fell apart in different ways and fought against each other at different times as well. In this time, Judah and Israel, for that matter, are fairly weak and struggling. Indeed, in Isaiah's own day, Israel is actually destroyed and never comes back again.

[6 : 41] Judah lasts. And the mighty superpower is a nation called Assyria. And not to be confused with Syria, Assyria is further north in modern North Iraq and Turkey. They were the world's superpower.

And they were threatening the people of Israel and Judah and other nations, for that matter, as well. And they were forcing their way south. 721, they defeated the northern part of Israel.

And they came, as we'll see in the next two weeks, right to the gates of Jerusalem as well. Now, the issue for the people of God in this time was, where do we find help?

Where do we turn for security? Where can we guarantee our future? It seems that God is not acting. It seems that the scales have gone the wrong way. That mighty pagan Assyria has got the ascendancy, the power and the influence and is prospering. But we, God's people, so-called, are just suffering, weak and threatened and vulnerable. And throughout the first part of Isaiah, up to really this point where we're looking at tonight, up to the end of chapter 33, we find that the people of Judah are turning every way but God for help. A couple of decades before these words, probably, about the 730s, Israel's problem was, Judah's problem rather, was their northern neighbour Israel and Syria. And Judah turned to Assyria for help. 20 years later, Assyria has become the threat and now it's turning to Egypt for help. But it doesn't really, don't really worry about sort of getting all those details right. The point is that whatever their threat, they found some nation to turn to, but not God. And that's the issue running through Isaiah 1 to 33. The nation is turning every which way but God for help. And that's its problem. And time and time again, Isaiah is rebuking them and encouraging them to turn rather to God and trust in Him. Their trust in the nations, whether it's Assyria, Syria, Israel or Egypt, is false trust, misplaced trust, trust that will come undone and unstuck and the nation would suffer.

[9 : 15] Now, it may be that the enemies are very strong now and look as though they will be victorious now. But Isaiah is in effect saying to the people of God, wait, because God will intervene and reverse the fortunes. And these mighty pagan nations will be brought down to destruction.

And God will protect His own people. Wait and trust in Him. And we know that by and large, they didn't heed those words. Although we will see an example where they did next week and the week after. Well, that theme of how Israel trusts in other nations rather than in God comes to a climax in the two chapters that we've heard today from chapters 34 and 35. The two chapters go together. Hopefully, as you heard them read, you felt the difference between them. Chapter 34 is bloodthirsty in its judgment. Chapter 35 is exalting in its praise and joy. But the two complement each other as the themes balance and reflect from the two chapters. That's why we need to look at them together. And they are showing us that God is bringing about a reversal. One of the themes running through chapter 34 is that the prosperous, fertile nations will be made desolate like a desert and a wilderness.

Whereas the people of God, who now in one sense are like a wilderness and in the wilderness, they will be made fertile and prosperous. So the themes will get reversed from chapter 34 into chapter 35.

[10 : 56] So to chapter 34 first. And this is the issue of judgment and God's wrath on the nations. And the first four verses deal with it on a universal scope. And then it focuses on one nation, which we'll see is representative of all the nations that are against God.

So chapter 34. And the invitation comes to all the nations to listen to God's words. Draw near, O nations, to hear. O peoples, give heed or pay attention. Let the earth hear and all that fills it.

That's all of trees and plants and animals. You can see that this is poetry. How can you really expect plants to listen? But it's a metaphorical or figurative language.

Everything has to come to listen to God's word being spoken here. But it's not a call, as often in the Old Testament, to be a witness.

Often the creation or the heavens and the earth are called to be a witness to something, but not here. Rather, a sentence is going to be carried out now against these nations.

[12 : 06] And in effect, all the chapters preceding it are God's accusations against the nations. Now comes the final sentence against them, based on all the evidence of the chapters before.

So verse 2. The Lord is enraged against all the nations and furious against all their hordes. God's anger, his wrath. They're the words that are used here.

They're strong words. It shows us that what the nations have done wrong offends God. He's angry by it. He's not like a judge of the Supreme Court who just hears a case and says, well, this is your sentence. Off you go to jail.

He is offended, personally affronted by the sin of these nations. Even though they're not, in a sense, God's own people in the Old Testament. They're pagan nations.

And yet God is upset, affronted, angry and full of wrath for their sin. It ought to remind us that whenever we fail, whenever we sin, God is offended.

[13:13] God is angry. God is full of wrath against sin. And so verse 2 goes on to say, He has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter.

Very strong words. The word for slaughter or giving them over to destroy them is a key word in the Old Testament.

It's to totally destroy. The Hebrew word is herem. It's something that is absolutely and totally destroyed without any trace or remnant left.

It's a word that's often used in warfare, where a nation is to, and especially Israel's instructions when they entered the land under Joshua, was to totally destroy the cities, the peoples, not leave any living thing.

That's the same word that's used. And it's the word that's used here. God will totally destroy these enemy nations. Just in the same way that Israel was meant to do it when they arrived in their promised land, God will now do.

[14:16] And we'll see that that's actually connected, because God's destruction of these nations here is to pave the way for his faithful people to enter into an even better promised land, a perfect and permanent promised land at the end of chapter 35.

And even though the verse 2, depending on your translation, seems to say God has already done this, the past tense actually conveys a certainty.

It's a future action. God's yet to do it. But it's so certain that it's sometimes used as a past tense, as here and in other verses that we'll see tonight. Now the effect for God's people on these words is this.

Why are you trusting these nations? God is going to destroy them. Why trust them? Yes, they look powerful now. They look as though they might help you now.

But God is going to so totally destroy them, that your trust in them will just come completely to nothing. And probably in the thread of Isaiah, you'll be drawn into their own destruction.

[15:27] Then it gets a bit more bloodthirsty in verses 3 onwards. Their slain will be cast out and the stench of their corpses shall rise. The mountains shall flow, literally dissolve with their blood.

That's not a very pleasant picture. These corpses seem to be just lying on the ground and that's a very degrading, shameful thing in the ancient world.

To bury a corpse was something that was very important, had to be done very quickly because to leave a corpse exposed overnight was very degrading, even if it was a criminal.

Lack of burial here seems to imply that there are just so many corpses, they can't bury them. They can't deal with them. This is total destruction. It's figurative language, remember.

The mountains being dissolved, literally, with blood or flowing with blood. Of course, it's a picture of something horrible, something that we turn up our nose at.

[16:28] And then it moves into a higher realm in verse 4. It really is a cosmic picture. Verse 4 says that all the host of heaven shall rot away and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their hosts shall wither like a leaf withering on a vine or fruit withering on a fig tree. Now, just as the whole creation is called to order and to attention in verse 1, now the whole of the creation is being destroyed in verse 4.

It's being, again, the idea of being dissolved. It suggests an internal decay. It's rotting away. There's something within it that is bad and is infecting it and spreading and rotting from within.

That's the sort of picture that's being used here. And of course, in the bigger scale of things, what it's speaking of is human sinfulness, the sinfulness of these pagan nations opposed to God.

Their sin does not just have an effect on them. Sin always has an effect on others, but not only on other people, on the whole world. We see that, of course, in Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

[17 : 40] Their sin wasn't just confined to themselves, but in the end its effects spread to the whole world, to childbirth, to labour of the ground, to the serpent and the relationships between all these things as well.

That's the same sort of picture here. The sinfulness of sinful people and sinful nations spreads to the world. So the whole universe is in decay, as Paul says in Romans 8, and is internally rotting away.

That's the picture of God's judgment. As he lets sin run its own course in human lives and in the world, it brings about its own destruction, in a sense. That's what's happening here.

The universe, you see, is infected by human sin and therefore it's got within it a built-in obsolescence, in a way. It's coming towards destruction. That's why at the end of Isaiah in chapter 65 and also at the end of Revelation, God's going to provide new heavens and a new earth because the old ones are full of self-destruction and internal corruption and so on.

Now whenever in the Bible, Old and New Testaments, we get pictures that deal with stars falling from heaven and the sun going black and all those sorts of things, very often they're picture keys, if you like, to tell us that we're looking at the end of history.

[19 : 04] It's a clue to the end. They're not necessarily going to be literally fulfilled, I think, but they're poetic language, picture language, or what we can call apocalyptic language, that describes the end of history and that's what's certainly being described here.

The book of Revelation picks up the language of this chapter. In Revelation 6, the sky vanishing like a scroll rolled up. It's the reverse of the creation in a sense. When God separated things and established the firmament, now what he's doing is rolling it all up, packing it away or throwing it out. God is returning things to chaos, as we'll see also in a few verses' time. And in Matthew 24, when Jesus predicts the end of history and talks about it, he uses some of these expressions as well, the stars falling from heaven and so on, pictures of the end.

When we see that sort of thing in Scripture, we should see the big picture and not get too caught up with the little detail of, well, stars falling from heaven, is that a shooting star, is that something else? It's the big picture that matters here. And Isaiah is talking about something at the end of history, in the end. Well, we've seen in verses 1 to 4 a cosmic picture of destruction, and now that gets focused onto a nation called Edom.

[20 : 25] And in one sense, that's surprising, I think. Where does Edom come from in all of this? Why is it mentioned? Why not Assyria or Egypt? There have been foes of Israel leading up to now in Isaiah.

Why little old Edom? But Edom, I think, is deliberately chosen. Edom is frequently the antithesis of Israel in the Old Testament.

Edom was the, Esau rather, was the twin brother of Jacob in Genesis. They fought, although later reconciled. And Edom is the nation descended from Esau.

But as history went on, these two brothers, or at least the nations descended from them, were not amicable. They rather fought.

When Israel was coming through the wilderness to the Promised Land, Edom refused them passage. So they had to go all the way around Edom to head towards the Promised Land in Numbers 20.

[21 : 23] Later on, when Israel was in the land, they were at war with them. King Saul fought against the Edomites. And then King David conquered the Edomites. The only time, it seems, that Edom was really conquered by Israel.

After that, it seems that they must have reasserted independence after David's time, because we find them to be at war with Solomon, Jehoram, Amaziah, and then they're accused by various prophets, including Amos.

And we find at a climax, if you like, of the enmity between Edom and Israel, that at the time when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, Edom was there, applauding, aiding, and abetting Babylon. Hence we get in Psalm 137, words against Edom, and in the prophet Obadiah, and so on. In the end, the nation of Edom got lost in history, destroyed, more or less.

Why Edom? Because they are a model of opposition to God's people. It also shows one of the things very early in the Bible.

[22 : 35] God said to Abram in his promises, I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse those who curse you. And here is God saying, I will keep that promise.

This is a nation that has consistently cursed you, and I will curse them, and bring them destruction. But Edom is not the sum total, even though this is focusing now on this one little nation.

Edom is a representative for all the nations. We see that in various ways, I guess. In verse 2, we saw that for all the nations, God's doomed them and given them over for slaughter.

That word herem that I mentioned before. But now in verse 5, regarding Edom, upon the people I have doomed to judgment. Same expression in the Hebrew.

So Edom, you see, is just one example of what God is going to do to all the enemies of God's people. So when we see Edom, we think, yes, one nation, but actually we can apply it to the Assyrians, to the Egyptians, to the Babylonians, to the Romans, to any group of people, really, who fundamentally opposed to God's people and therefore to God.

[23 : 51] It seems that this cosmic battle has reached its fill. Verse 5, and the sword has drunk its fill in the heavens. There's no more work for God's sword to do there, so to speak, so now it comes to earth and descends to earth.

But the links between the two are probably deliberate. That is that the enmity by people or nations on earth against God and his people is really paralleled by enmity to God in the spiritual realm.

We see that, of course, in a lot of Paul's writings, I guess. And it's so true, isn't it? Enmity to God, you see, is not just a human thing. Ultimately, at its root, there is a spiritual enmity, if you like, a heavenly realm type enmity against God that has human manifestation.

That's the sort of connection that's being made here, I think. The big picture gives us the clue.

Edom is, if you like, a physical representation of what's going on in heaven.

Well, then comes verses 6 and 7. These are perhaps some of the bloodiest words of the Old Testament. The sword of the Lord is bathed in blood, covered with fat.

[25 : 06] The blood of lambs and goats, fat from the kidneys of rams. The Lord has a sacrifice in Bosra, which is chief city of Edom at the time, about 25 miles south of the Dead Sea, and a great slaughter in Edom.

And the wild oxen will fall with them, the bull calves, the great bulls, their land will be drenched with blood, and the dust will be soaked with fat. That is an awful picture of a nation.

It's gory, it's bloodthirsty, and yet, before you think, oh, how can we cope with the Old Testament as Christians, it is very, very restrained compared to the other ancient Near Eastern writings of the time.

We think the Old Testament is bloodthirsty, but compared to the other things written 700 BC, it's very restrained. And God certainly is taking no delight in this either, which happens in the other ancient Near Eastern religions.

The gods are sort of wiping their hands with joy and glee at seeing the blood flow of their enemies. That's not here. The restrained tone tells us how seriously God takes sin, and yet there's a sense in which God is himself almost horrified at what's happening and what has to happen.

[26 : 18] The picture of this destruction is a picture of a sacrifice. We're told that explicitly in verse 6, and that's what the blood, the fat, the kidneys, and the animals are all about.

When the Jews would go up to the Israel temple in Jerusalem, they would on the altar make their sacrifices. The ancient Jerusalem temple is not so much like a cathedral as like an abattoir.

It would have stunk probably of blood and dead animals. But people would see in that and feel and smell in that the horror of their own sin being atoned for in the sacrifice.

Now the whole nation of Edom is pictured as a sacrifice. Their whole land is pictured as an altar.

That's the picture at the end of verse 7 about the whole land and dust being soaked with fat and blood because the area around the altar would have been soaked with blood in the temple, but now we're being told that their whole nation is a sacrifice.

Now why is that image being used here of destruction? A couple of reasons perhaps. One is that sin must receive some sort of sacrifice.

[27 : 36] And if there is not one other to make it, then the sinner must be it. And Edom, the sinner, the sinner nation, representative of all sinful nations and people, will suffer for its sin and be sacrificed for its own sin.

And in effect, that's the horror because what's happening to Edom here is what we deserve as well as sinful people. But the reason why the fate of Edom is not our fate is because one other has been sacrificed in our place.

We could have been this if it were not for the death of Jesus Christ. The horror of this picture ought to make us more aware and more acutely aware of the importance, significance, and horror of Jesus' death for us.

But it also shows something about God. the picture of Edom as a sacrifice for its own sin reminds us that what God is doing here is not something malicious or nasty, but rather something holy. God is preserving His holiness. His holiness means that sin must and will be judged and destroyed because God is holy.

[29 : 02] If this didn't happen, horrible though it is, God's own holiness would be compromised. And in the book of Isaiah, God's holiness is an important theme.

From beginning to end, the issue is that God is the Holy One of Israel. The people recoil from that. Chapter 29 and 30, they say, we don't want to know anything about this God who is the Holy One of Israel.

But He remains holy and sin will be judged. It's about, therefore, the vindication of God. If He is holy, His holiness must in the end triumph.

He is the Holy King in effect. And so this judgment is God bringing about a destruction of sin as a sacrifice because of His own holiness. Then it goes on in verse 8.

The Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution to uphold Zion's cause. Again, we're in poetic language.

[30 : 03] I keep stressing this. A day of vengeance, a year of retribution, they parallel each other. We shouldn't be too worried about a day as though it's 24 hours or a year as though it's 365 and a quarter days.

It's a use of time that is poetic. God is going to bring vengeance in His time. It's in effect what it's saying in a poetic way. God is going to bring retribution in His time is what it's saying.

You see, the issue is not just that the nations are against God but that the nations are also against God's people. So God is going to bring all this to uphold Zion's cause, a symbol or keyword for God's people.

Zion is another name for Jerusalem. They've attacked God's people. Therefore, God is going to uphold their cause. They're His people. He's made promises to them. And so He's going to bring about the reversal I talked about.

That's what the issue of vengeance and retribution is about. It's further explained in the next chapter as we'll see in a few minutes. But the issue of this vengeance and retribution is that God is going to restore the balance.

[31 : 11] He's going to exalt His people and bring down their opponents and His opponents therefore as well. But just because He's doing it for Zion's cause ought not to make us sort of jump two and a half thousand years and think, oh, this is Zionism.

We should be Zionists and be doing things for the sake of building up Zion or Jerusalem in modern day Israel. None of that. As we'll see at the end of tonight's study, Zion is something far greater than physical Jerusalem in modern day or even ancient day Israel.

When is that day and year going to be? Is it a particular historical time? Is it perhaps just a general principle? Well, this day, which is the day of the Lord, is clearly tied up in the overall scan of the Bible with Jesus Christ's coming.

Interestingly, when Jesus came and said He was fulfilling the Old Testament, He left off in that quote from Isaiah 61, the day of vengeance. He was coming to bring salvation and healing and so on.

But when He returns, that's the day of vengeance, it seems. He came to bring salvation and when He comes again will come the time of vengeance and judgment on this world.

[32 : 29] That's ultimately what this verse is heading towards. But in history itself, there will be days when that is prefigured, when there will be foretastes of that final day of the Lord.

Even in Old Testament history, I think, there were days like that. Well, then comes a picture of Edom destroyed which we'll just skim very briefly.

It's described in verses 9 and 10 as being like Sodom and Gomorrah, cities that were turned to salt and destruction and sulfur back in Genesis chapter 19. This is a picture of a perpetual wasteland of sulfur and pitch, nothing much that would survive in that sort of thing.

and it stresses in verse 10 the perpetuity of it. This is not temporary judgment. This is everlasting judgment. And it's stressed three times and in ascending emphasis.

That is, night and day it will not be quenched. It will rise forever from generation to generation it will lie desolate. That is, and then no one will ever pass through it again.

[33 : 38] So, it's stressing in words that sort of gain their intensity this will last forever. There will be no reversal, no reprieve for this judgment.

This is final judgment which is a little bit unlike the sort of historical events, say, in Old Testament history. And God does bring judgment but it's not permanent and final necessarily.

We still await that day of final judgment. This picture of verses 9 and 10 of course is taken up by John in Revelation 19 and Sodom and Gomorrah and the smoke that rises forever and so on.

Clearly John, you see, saw this day, this picture as being fulfilled at the end of history when Jesus returns. And then the picture of destroyed Edom moves from the destruction of burning pitch and sulfur to a picture of depopulation and where there were people, now it's just animals left which is a fairly sombre picture of a nation destroyed.

You imagine, take away all the people of Melbourne, depopulate it, come back in 50 years time and it'll be just full of animals wandering in the ruins of the town.

[34 : 49] That's the sort of picture that's being described in verses 11 onwards. Various animals are mentioned, some of them are, nobody's quite sure exactly what sort of owl it is or what sort of animal it is.

We ought not to worry too much about that. In verse 11, at the end of the verse, God shall stretch the line of confusion over it and the plummet of chaos over its nobles.

This is a measuring line, a plumb line, a line that's used to make sure a building is straight and what God is doing here as he does in Amos 7 is to put on his upright line of righteousness and he sees that Edom is skewed, Edom's off and hence he'll destroy it.

It's a building that will not stand. That's the sort of picture. It's a crooked nation and will therefore come to desolation and chaos in verse 11. The word that's a rare word used in Genesis 1 verse 2, the chaos and formlessness before the creation.

You see, judgment in a sense is pushing things back pre-creation to the chaos and formlessness and void that was there before God ever started speaking.

[36 : 02] not only the people but the leaders of the people in verse 12, the nobles and princes, they'll be gone. Nobody will be safe in Edom being destroyed.

And then thorns will overrun the citadels and nettles and brambles. Maybe even there an allusion back to Genesis 3 where as part of the punishment for sin, Adam when he's toiling in the ground would find thorns and thistles and so on in the ground.

This is again a picture of judgment against sin like in Genesis chapter 3. Some of the animals are a little bit creepy and sinister. The jackals, the owls, they all suggest nightlife.

This is clearly not a picture that is one of light and joy. If this is a land full of burning sulfur and pitch, how can these animals live there?

Nine and ten told us it was full of burning sulfur and pitch but eleven to fifteen fill it up with all these strange animals. Of course we're mixing metaphors, we're using poetry.

[37 : 13] All the pictures aren't necessarily meant to fit logically together. We saw that the last two years with Revelation as well. When the Bible is poetic as it is in several places, then we shouldn't expect necessarily a tight logic to follow.

the points of the picture, they're making different points. The picture of sulfur is about destruction, this is about depopulation and no human life lasting there and even the animals that are there are not the animals that you'd feed on if you were trying to sustain human life.

Then the end of the chapter, two strange verses tacked on the end in one sense. verse 16 says, Isaiah writing down his words as a witness is important and that could be what's being spoken about here.

It may be that it's God's book. It may be in a sense saying God's plan, using a metaphor of a book or a scroll and inviting people to look at it, although if it is God's book, of course you can't do that. But the idea behind these words is that what God has said here is absolutely certain. No doubt about it.

[38 : 55] It is written in God's book. God is sovereign, therefore it will happen. Don't doubt it. Now remember that Isaiah is addressing his own people, God's people, and they are people who are not trusting in God.

So he's wanting to make it very clear to them, don't you doubt this word? That's what you've been doing all your history, doubting God's word. Don't doubt this word.

This is absolutely certain. It is written in God's book, therefore it's in a sense in indelible ink, and it will not change. And not only is it written in God's book, but the mouth of the Lord has said it, and his spirit testifies to it at the end of verse 16.

So you've got it written, you've got the mouth, and you've got the spirit, as though you've got three witnesses who, in one sense, independently confirm this word. It is absolutely certain.

Believe it, trust it. Remember that he's addressing people who are not trusting in God. So the emphasis is on trust God's word.

[40 : 00] It's reliable, he is sovereign, it will come to pass. It may not look at now in history, but it will happen. Trust his word.

Why trust the nations, Egypt and Assyria? They may look as though they're top of the ladder at the moment, but God will destroy them. And if you trust them, your trust will be misplaced and come unstuck.

Why trust Assyria? Why trust any nation? Why trust yourselves? Trust only God, because only he is sovereign. And his word will come to pass. And if you are to have a future and a security and prosperity, if you are to see the scales reversed and God's people exalted, then trust in God and God alone is what will bring that about.

That's what Isaiah is emphasising here. He's not actually speaking to Edom. He's speaking to the people of Judah. Trust God's word.

Edom and Assyria and Egypt and Syria and all the other nations for that matter, they'll all be destroyed. Don't trust them. Trust God.

[41 : 13] And from our perspective of history, 2700 years later, Edom's gone. Destroyed. Centuries ago, from our perspective, although a few centuries after Isaiah.

Well, now we come into chapter 35, an easier chapter to deal with, one that we're probably more familiar with, and yet one that is clearly a complement or counterpart to chapter 34.

building on its themes and its words, but reversing them. Going from a wilderness to a garden, from desert to fertility, from judgment and destruction to salvation, hope and joy.

The picture begins with the desert coming into blue. Some of you may have travelled in desert areas of Australia at the right time of year after rain and seen flowers in the desert.

That's the sort of picture that's here. Where you don't expect to see flowers because it's so dry and arid, here they are blooming. Even a crocus, although nobody's quite sure what sort of flower that is.

[42 : 15] Something that's actually a swamp type flower, which would even be more ironical in a desert to have a swamp. It will burst into bloom. Carmel, Sharon and Lebanon are mentioned in verse 2.

Three areas renowned for their fertility, their forests, their growth, their lush land, so to speak.

Lebanon, we know. Carmel is in Israel a mountain area of forests and Sharon was a plain that was very lush and very full of fertility and crops and so on.

The desert, you see, is turning into forested areas. This is the metaphor of reversal again. It's not really literally talking about deserts and forests.

It's talking about God bringing down the arrogant and lifting up the proud. God bringing down those who are opposed to him and lifting up those who place their faith and trust in him. That's the metaphor that's being used here.

It's actually one that's being used in earlier chapters. So we shouldn't just think, oh, well, this is talking about forests and things. It's not. It's talking about God's people. He will lift them up and bless them after he has judged the nations in chapter 34.

[43 : 27] And this picture of going from desert to cultivated fertility is a reversal of the curse in Genesis 3 again. No thorns here, no thistles here, no nettles, but rather good things that are coming out of the good earth.

And even though obviously water is a natural cause for this, there's no water mentioned until verses 6 and 7. The other thing about verses 1 and 2, and we'll see it again at the end of the chapter, is that it's all about joy.

It's not actually about the flowers, but it's about the joy in God who's doing all this. And that's what the end of verse 2 is telling us. The cause of it is God.

They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Who are they? We're not told who they are. Normally if you write good English, you put a noun and then when you use a pronoun you're referring to an earlier noun.

There's no earlier noun here to refer to. They shall see the glory of the Lord. Who's they? We're told only later. It seems to be the blind and the deaf and so on in verses 5 and 6 who have their handicaps reversed and also those who are ransomed in verses 9 and 10.

[44 : 41] But it is God who is the cause of all of this. But there are other allusions going on here. The end of wilderness into fertility is probably also reminiscent of the people of Israel under Moses going from the wilderness desert into the promised land's fertility.

Remember the descriptions in Exodus and Deuteronomy about the land flowing with milk and honey and all the crops that you want are there and so on. That's what this picture is like. That's probably what it's meant to recall to mind.

This is a people who at least metaphorically if not literally are going from a wilderness into the promised land. But not here the Sinai wilderness into Canaan but rather from the wilderness of this world into God's heavenly promised land.

That's ultimately where this passage is heading. To say at the end of verse 2 that they shall see the glory of the Lord is a great privilege. The glory of the Lord is his presence.

It's tied up with his sovereignty, his kingship, his holiness. To see God and live was an extraordinary privilege as you see back at Mount Sinai with Moses in Exodus 32 and 33.

[45 : 56] You see this is the glory of the Lord. A theme of salvation running through Isaiah and picked up by John's gospel as well whenever Jesus performs a miracle and dies on the cross.

Then Isaiah goes in verses 3 and 4 to the purpose of all this again. We've got to keep remembering who he's addressing and why and it becomes explicit in verses 3 and 4.

Strengthen the weak hands. Make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart be strong do not fear. Here is your God. He will come with vengeance with terrible recompense.

He'll come and save you. This is to people who are faint hearted. People who are afraid. People who are lacking in faith and trust. So now explicitly Isaiah says what he's trying to do in these whole two chapters.

Gain faith. Strengthen your faith. Make firm your feeble knees. That is stand up strong and so on.

Remember that the people are losing their faith under the threat of mighty Assyria.

[46 : 59] Have faith in God is in effect what is being said here. And verse 4 when it says say to those who are of a fearful heart be strong do not fear is clearly an allusion back to God's words to Joshua when Joshua became the leader and God said to him before he entered the promised land be not afraid be of good courage.

Why is that used here? Because as we've seen the people are in a sense moving from wilderness to promised land to the heavenly permanent promised land just as Joshua in a foretaste of that moved the people of Israel from the wilderness into the land of Canaan so many centuries before. The end of verse 4 says that God will come. God himself will come and he'll do two things. He'll come with vengeance and he'll come with retribution or recompense.

The vengeance is against his enemies to bring judgment. The retribution or the recompense is for his own people to vindicate them.

You see when God comes he will bring down the proud that's the judgment that's the vengeance and lift up the lowly that's the recompense or the retribution the great reversal the correction of the balance of this world and it will happen at the same time.

[48 : 21] Judgment for some is salvation for others and vice versa. The two go together and those brands of Christianity that try and dismiss any notion of judgment and still hold on to salvation have corrupted it so much there's no salvation left if there is no judgment as well.

And God is coming to do it. Maybe a hint of incarnation even that God himself would come to this earth. Isaiah throughout is anticipating God's coming and we know of course that he's come and yet he's also coming again and we look forward to that day.

It also reminds us of course that we don't have to get to God because he comes to us. We'll say that even more clearly in three weeks time in Isaiah 40. But how good God is.

He doesn't sit up there and say hey this is where you should be get up here. But he comes to where his people are and takes them home. Pictures of salvation follow in verses five and six.

The eyes of the blind opened. Ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame leaping. The mute shouting for joy. Yes they're physical expressions. But in Isaiah so many many times already the deaf, the blind are those who are cut off from God, who are blind to his word or deaf to his word.

[49 : 48] Clearly ultimately these words are not saying the person who's got no physical sight will get it. But rather those who for whatever reason are blind to God and deaf to his word.

He will rectify that and change it. We only have to look at Isaiah 6 and Isaiah's own commission to see that that's what this verse is about. And when Jesus in effect quotes words like this in Luke 4 and other places and when he performs miracles of restoring sight in John chapter 9, it's clear that in the end he's pointing to something far more significant than the restoration of physical handicaps. He's pointing to spiritual sight and spiritual hearing, spiritual walking in God's ways and so on. Then comes the mention of water.

That brings forth the streams, that brings forth the flowers and so on from verses 1 and 2. The desert is no longer desert. It's become a garden.

The wilderness has become like the garden of Eden all over again. God with his people in paradise. And it's God who does this in every point.

[51 : 01] Nowhere in this chapter is at any hint that Israel will do it, that Judah would do it, that anybody else will do it. But God, he is the only instrument of salvation.

And then comes the highway. Just as we've seen in this suburb in the last couple of years, the building of this extended freeway and the leveling it out, the high bits being lowered and the low bits being raised so it's a smooth road all the way through to Springvale Road and so on.

This is a highway to go out into the desert to pick up God's people and to bring them home. A picture we'll see again in chapter 40 in more clarity. But notice that it's called, and that's like the Exodus all over again.

God bringing his people from wilderness to his presence. Notice that it's called a way of holiness. You see, the way to God is not separate from morality and holiness and behavior.

That holiness of God is something so important in this book. Isaiah's own vision that seemed to be part of his commission in chapter 6 was about a God who is thrice holy. Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.

[52 : 08] The holiness of God not only, see, brings judgment. The holiness of God also brings salvation. And to talk about the way of holiness reminds us that it's not just an abstract idea, but the practice of behavior, the way that we live our lives and the direction of our lives.

What is this talking about, these verses of this chapter so far? It's poetry. It's images. It's picture language. It's language that's meant to move our emotions.

It's language, really, that's actually meant to fill us with the joy that is described of those people in this chapter. This language, you see, in the end is too exalted just to be talking about the people of God in the Old Testament coming back to Jerusalem after it's destroyed.

And even though there are hints that that's where they were looking, this language is far greater than that. And the reality of when they did come back 200 years after Isaiah to ruined Jerusalem, it never meant anything like this.

There was no joy then at all. rather still despair. You see, this is pointing us further than the restoration of Jerusalem.

[53 : 31] It's pointing us to the one who will come and take his people to be with God. The one who says, I am the way to Jesus himself.

Verse 9 tells us that there's no threat on this road. No lion shall be there or ravenous beast. This is a safe road protected by God. If you're on the road to God, if you're on the road of holiness, as Christian people are, then you are on a safe road.

God's protecting you and it. Nobody else will be on this road. This is the narrow way that Jesus spoke of. There won't be any fools there. The fools here are not simpletons.

I remember going to primary school with a chap who I think was a fool in the simpleton sense. He believed that he had rice pudding in his head. And it was sad. He was a nice chap. But he was quite a fool.

But that's not the fool that's being spoken of here. The fool here is the person who knows nothing of God, who rejects God's ways and turns away from them. There won't be any of those people on this road.

[54 : 38] This will only be for God's faithful people. A safe road. And they're called redeemed people at the end of verse 9. A word that's so important in the Bible.

To redeem something is to pay money to free it. If you are short of money, you put your watch in a pawn shop and then when you've got some money, you go to redeem your watch. You usually pay more than you originally got for it, of course.

That's how they make their money. But that's redeeming it. And you redeem something, or the word in the next verse is ransom something, at a price. You pay to set it free. And that's what God has done for us.

He's redeemed us in Old and New Testaments at a price. It's free for us, but it cost him his son's death. And even here is a hint of that, that God's people are bought with a price by God.

For their freedom. That's us. And so the verse, chapter finishes, the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing, full of joy on their heads.

[55 : 47] It'll last forever. They'll obtain joy and gladness. There'll be no more sorrow or sighing. They'll flee away. This is a permanent picture of joy and bliss. But I want to finish by saying this is not just talking about going to Jerusalem.

In November it'll be great to go to Jerusalem. You're welcome to join me. But this is not talking about joy and going to Zion, to Jerusalem. Because what happens in the Bible is that Zion or Jerusalem is really only ever a symbol, in a sense, of God's presence with his people.

The temple in Jerusalem was the mark of where God would be with his people in a direct relationship. That's the point of it in the Old Testament. It doesn't actually matter about its geographical location in a sense.

And in the New Testament where God and his people meet is no longer a building or a city but a person. Jesus Christ.

So in the New Testament the writer to the Hebrews can say that we Christians have already come to Zion. We're there in Hebrews 12 because we've come to Jesus.

[57 : 01] So the promises in the Old Testament that apply to Zion or Jerusalem are fulfilled not in modern day Jerusalem or any other day Jerusalem. They're fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And when we come to Jesus we've come to Zion. We've come to the heavenly Jerusalem. The picture that John has at the very end of the Bible coming down out of heaven as a bride for us. So we're there. We're there. So we ought to be the sort of people for whom everlasting joy is upon our heads. Christians must be joyful people because we're already there because we're redeemed by Jesus.

If you're not sure of what I'm saying read Hebrews 12 22 onwards again. We've already got there if we're Christian people. So therefore we ought to be people for whom it's true to say everlasting joy is upon their heads.

They shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Now of course there's a sense in which only in heaven will that be perfectly fulfilled. But now there must surely be foretastes of that in our daily life as Christian people because we've come to Jesus.

[58 : 11] In the Old Testament some of the Psalms are Psalms that the people would sing as they walked up the hill to Jerusalem. Psalms of great joy.

Psalms about how glad they were when they said let's go to the house of the Lord. All of that joy is nothing compared to the joy of Christian people coming to the Lord Jesus Christ.

When we sing those Psalms we ought to be more full of joy than those original singers were because we've come to the real thing not just the earthly shadow.

Well this is the hope of the Bible isn't it? The hope of the Bible is that God's people from all nations will come to God around the heavenly Jerusalem and at the points of the Old Testament history they're just little indications of what the ultimate reality is going to be like.

Don't confuse the indications then with what the ultimate reality is because the ultimate reality is much better than it. And so this little picture here at the end of chapter 35 is a glimpse of what the whole Bible is heading towards.

[59 : 22] Where you and I are heading towards if we're not in a sense already there now. Let's stop for a word of prayer and then we'll sing a song of joy of praise.

Oh God we thank you for this extraordinary word so many hundreds of years before Jesus and even more before us and yet words that speak to our heart and remind us about how faithful you are to your word.

That what you say does come to pass that we can trust it and not doubt in it. We thank you our God that from the beginning you are working towards bringing your people of every nation to your own presence that you would come to us to take us home along the way of holiness.

We thank you for your son who did that for us who redeemed us at a precious and costly price to carry us home to you to Zion to the heavenly Zion.

Our father we pray that in our lives we may indeed be people for whom joy is a mark of our life. Joy in knowing you joy in living holy lives joy in being part of your people saved by your precious son.

[60 : 45] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.