

The Desert will Blossom

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Date: 08 July 2018

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[0 : 00] And the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. Or as it's put in the authorized version, the desert will blossom like the rose or bloom like the rose.

The message of the Bible is one of transformation and therefore it's one of hope. Hope because the world is in such a mess and our lives are in such a mess.

And we need this transformation that the Bible speaks of. And I suppose there are a few passages in the Bible, Old Testament or New, that communicate that message of transformation as powerfully and poetically as this passage.

The desert will blossom like the rose. The picture of course has a historical reference point. It's speaking about a new exodus.

You know how in the original exodus the people were set free and redeemed from Egypt and brought to the promised land. Well here what is being considered is the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon, approximately five and a half centuries before the time of Christ.

[1 : 14] And they were going to be returning through deserts to the promised land. And that's the picture that we have in our mind here. But that's only the jumping off point as Isaiah prophesies about this.

In verse 8 we read, And a highway will be there, it will be called the way of holiness. And then it speaks of a highway for our God.

And that reminds us of what's said in chapter 40 of Isaiah, which is prophesying about the coming of John the Baptist, who was a voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord.

So, as so much of the prophet of Isaiah is pointing forward, of course, to the coming of the Lord Jesus. The return of the people from exile in Babylon was a good thing, it was a great thing, it was a work of God, but it was only pointing forward to a greater joy that was yet to come.

So I want to think with you first of all about the coming of the Lord as expressed in the early verses of this chapter, verses 1 to 7. And to understand this correctly, we've really got to understand the oriental attitude to the desert.

[2 : 40] We may have all sorts of ideas about the desert, we may think it's very impressive, we may see pictures and films on television about it, but the attitude in the Near East or Middle East to the desert is very different.

Perhaps it was summed up well by Lawrence of Arabia, who wrote, No Arab loves the desert. We love water and green trees. There is nothing in the desert.

No man needs nothing. And that kind of sums up, I think, what's behind a lot of what the Old Testament says about the desert or the wilderness. It's a hostile environment, inimical to life.

So the picture of the wilderness and desert is being used as a representation of a spiritual experience.

Because here the picture is of the exiles returning from exile. And that experience was one of a wilderness experience, the desolation of being strangers in a strange land.

[3 : 53] And so the wilderness is this symbol of the human predicament in general. Robert Louis Stevenson said, We are all travellers in the wilderness of the world, and the best that we can find in our travels is an honest friend.

So often the picture of the wilderness of the desert is used in this sort of sense, that we're living our life in so many ways in a wilderness. It speaks of a spiritual experience.

Or T.S. Eliot wrote a poem called The Wasteland, which really describes a kind of more 20th century view of the desert or the wilderness in modern society.

And it's been described as the confusion of purpose in a world in decay, barren ugliness and hopelessness. And later on T.S. Eliot in The Rock says, You neglect and belittle the desert.

The desert is not remote in southern tropics. The desert is not only around the corner. The desert is squeezed in the tube tray next to you. The desert is in the heart of your brother.

[5 : 06] So this idea that the desert or the wilderness sums up something of our common human experience. C.S. Lewis put it like this, The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.

Again using this picture of the desert as an area where there is no life, there's nothing hopeful. So the educator is trying to bring some hope to this situation.

Or Bob Dylan in his famous song Desolation Row, which again speaks of this idea of desolation or the desert or wilderness. It's really an absurd drama, peopled by various absurd characters and situations.

For instance, Einstein disguised as Robin Hood, the phantom of the opera, the perfect image of a priest. And then he says, The Titanic sails at dawn and everybody's shouting, Which side are you on?

And Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot are fighting in the captain's tower. So he has this picture that goes on verse after verse after verse, speaking about the absurdity of this desolation row, which is the way he sums up modern life.

[6 : 20] So the desert, the wilderness, has become a symbol of the empty, the unproductive, the desolate, and the frighteningly alien. And it's often spoken of in terms of the urban situation, not the wilderness out there in the more rural setting.

So that's the picture that is being used here, the desert. But then what's been spoken of is a transformation. And it's really like the coming of spring to the desert.

You know, the desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

Now this is what happened in various areas of the desert when rains came. And suddenly what before seemed absolutely lifeless and dead springs into life.

And that's a picture that has been used of God's great work. It was happening, Isaiah said, it would happen in the experience of the exiles, but also in a transformation, a spiritual transformation in our experience.

[7 : 30] Because all of this is foreshadowing the coming of Christ. It is all because of God coming in glory. In verse 2, they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.

Now, the people returning from exile didn't literally see the glory of the Lord and the splendor of our God. But the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ certainly enabled people to see the glory of the Lord in his person.

And so, there's tremendous encouragement in verses 3 and 4 here. For instance, we read, Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those of an anxious heart, Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with a recompense of God. He will come to save you. Now, the picture here is of people who are weak or enervated and afraid.

And that's the way so many of the people returning from exile must have felt. But what's the antidote to this? It seems quite surprising to us. It speaks about God coming in judgment.

[8 : 43] And we tend to think of that kind of negatively as something to be afraid of. But so often in the Old Testament, For the people of God, The judgment of God was their hope.

Because it meant the end to oppression. It meant the end to those who are their enemies trying to do them down. And that judgment of God was directed to save his people.

And so, again, we think forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus. Because Jesus, speaking of his own death, said, Now is the judgment of this world.

But the judgment that was due to the world fell on him, As he took the judgment due to our sin. And so, as we think of our salvation, We think also of the judgment of God.

That was due to us, But was taken by the Lord Jesus. Also in this transformation, There's healing. In verses 5 and 6, We read here, Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf unstopped.

[9 : 56] 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. Here, the picture changes slightly.

It's speaking of people who are disabled, Who are blind, Who are deaf, Who are lame, Who are mute, And their lives are transformed. And we were reading this morning about Blind Bartimaeus,

Who met Jesus, And his life was transformed as Jesus, Healed him.

And so again, We're being pointed forward, To the coming of the Lord Jesus. Never was this ever heard of before. That the blind would see, The deaf would hear, The lame would walk, The mute would speak.

That's what the Lord Jesus Christ did, Literally. And yet again, It's speaking of the great transforming power, Of the grace of God, Coming in the person of Jesus.

That it will give to the spiritually blind, Their sight. And the spiritually deaf hearing. And the spiritually crippled, Wholeness and health.

[11:07] That's what the coming of the Lord Jesus meant. And also, There's an emphasis here, Upon fulfillment, In this transformation. In verses 6 and 7.

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 haunt of jackals, Where they lie down the grass, Shall become reeds and rushes.

The word that's translated here, As the burning sand, Could possibly be translated, As the mirage. You know how in the desert, You can have a mirage. That means, That you see, Something that looks like a pool of water, Or even some buildings, Or something like that.

And as you walk nearer it, You discover, It was not real. It was just a kind of reflection, Or refraction. I remember actually, On a summer as hot as this, Right up in the north of Scotland, With my father, Looking across some moorland, And seeing a huge loch of water, Where we knew there was no loch.

[12:19] And it was exactly the same phenomenon, That you have in the desert. And you can see it sometimes again, In hot weather like this, On a long stretch of road, You look ahead, And you see what looks like pools of water, On the road.

And they're not real, They're not there. And what is being told us here, Is that, People would see these mirages, In the desert. And it would raise false hopes.

Because, There was no, Oasis there. There was no water there. And that speaks to us again, Of, All the things in our lives, That promise fulfillment, And disappoint.

Whether it's our work, Our relationships, Our possessions, Our creativity, Whatever it is, Can be summed up, In the lines of that hymn, I've tried, I've tried the broken cisterns, Lord, But, Ah, The waters failed.

Real fulfillment comes, In knowing God. The mirage becomes, An oasis, With the coming of the Lord. And that's what we see, In the life and person of Jesus, As we see the reality, As Jesus comes to satisfy, That deep thirst, Of our lives.

[13:30] So that's, If we like, The first half of this chapter, But the second half, Speaks about the way of the Lord. Because here the picture is, Of the exiles returning, Through the desert, And coming back, To the promised land.

And we have that here, In verses 8 to 10. And the highway shall be there, And it shall be called, The way of holiness. And then down in verse 10, The ransomed of the Lord, Shall return, And come to Zion.

So the first thing we notice, About this way of the Lord, Is that it gives, Direction. And this is, Such a common problem in life, Isn't it?

Knowing, Direction. Again, Bob Dylan had a song, Called like a rolling stone, In the chorus it said, No direction home. In other words, People disoriented, Not knowing, What was the right way to go, Or what way was home.

It's a picture of people, Feeling lost, Or exiled, Feeling pointless. And here, Now we're being told, That there is a direction, There is a way of the Lord, And it leads to Zion.

[14:47] And of course, That was literally the case, For the people returning from exile, They were traveling, They were traveling this way of the Lord, Being brought back to the promised land, And their destination, Was Jerusalem.

That again, Is a picture, Of our lives, That we, Through the gospel, Are given, A destination. We're given the destination, Of eternal life, Through Jesus Christ.

And that gives us, A sense of direction. So many people today, Are struggling, Because of, No sense of direction in life. What are they really going to do? What's their life all about?

The Christian, Ought to have that sense of direction. And we've got to ask ourselves, Have we got that sense of direction? Do we know, Where we're going in life? But not only is this way of the Lord,

Giving people a sense of direction, It's also characterized by holiness.

It's the way, Of holiness, We're told, In verse 8. And that's repeated, In various ways, In the following verses. The unclean, Will not journey on it.

[15 : 58] It will be for those, Who walk in that way. And so on. We're told that without holiness, We cannot see God. But, In ourselves, In our natural condition, We don't have holiness.

We're unholy. Which means, We are unlike God. We are sinners. We're sinful. So how can we walk in that way? If it's a way of holiness?

The only way, Is through what is said here, In verses 9 and 10. But the redeemed, Shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord, Shall return, And come to Zion, With singing.

It's only through, The redemptive work, Of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is only through, The ransom that he has paid, That we can walk in that way. And that we can have, That sense of direction.

And that we can eventually, Reach that destination, Of heaven, Of eternal life. It's also, A way of safety. Because in verse 9, It said, That, No lion, Shall be there, Nor shall any ravenous beast, Come up on it.

[17 : 13] They shall not be found there. Again, We tend to think, Because of, Nature programs, And so on, Of the, Sort of attractiveness, Of wild animals, Like lions.

But people in the ancient world, To them, Lions were extremely dangerous, Because, Not only were they a danger, To their livestock, They were only, They were also a danger, To themselves. So the lion here, Is being, Used as a symbol, Of, The, The, The enemies of God.

You can think of, Daniel being thrown, Into the den of lions. And that's the picture, That we ought to have, In our mind. But, What we're told, Here, Is that there'll be no lion, There, There'll be, There'll not be that, Sense of destruction, There'll be safety, Because, The God, Who is in control, Of the natural world, Will control, Not only the powers of nature, But the powers of men, So that he will protect, His people.

And the people, In the Old Testament, Returning from exile, They knew that protection, As God protected them, And led them back, To the promised land. But we also can know, That protection, At a deeper level, That the Lord Jesus Christ, Said he would be with us, He would never leave us, Or forsake us, And he would watch over us.

The final thing we see, In this section, Of Isaiah, Is the emphasis on joy. The redeemed, Will enter Zion, With singing, Everlasting joy, Shall be upon their heads, They shall obtain, Gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing, Shall flee away.

[19 : 02] Now we know, The experience of sorrow and sighing, We know grief and pain, In all sorts of different ways, In life. But, What is being, Foreshadowed here, Is the removal, Of all sorrow and sighing, Where God shall wipe away, All our tears.

No doubt, The return of the people, From exile in Babylon, To Jerusalem, Was a time of great rejoicing. But it was only, It was only a temporary thing, We know that, So many troubles, Came in as well, After that time, And, It wasn't a lasting thing.

But again, It's pointing forward, To the coming of the Lord Jesus, And what he's going to do for us, And what he has done for us, But especially, The promise, That one day, He will wipe away, All tears from our eyes.

So all the, The sorrow and sighing, The grief and the pain, Will be no more. That's a glorious hope, Held out in the gospel. So, We desperately need, This transformation, Brought by God's grace, And power, That this section, Speaks of.

Because, We need it, Because of our desolation, Our weakness, Our inability, Our disappointment, Our lostness, Our wickedness, Our vulnerability, Our grief.

[20 : 24] The grace of God, Sets us on a road, Where all these, Begin to be healed. And that leads eventually, To a city, Where that healing, Will be complete.

The city of God, Pictured, In that revelation of John, At the end of the book, Of Revelation. The Christian, Therefore, Can have the optimism, Which Anne Frank, Was groping after, When she wrote in her diary, During the second world war, I see the world, Gradually being turned, Into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching, Thunder, Which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings, Of millions, And yet, If I look up, Into the heavens, I think, That it will all come right, That this cruelty too, Will end, And that peace, And tranquility, Will return again, Now we know the basis, Of that hope, And that is, The Lord Jesus Christ, As the only one, Who can bring that peace, And tranquility, That the human heart, Longs for.

So, Have we the confidence, This evening, That the desert, Will blossom like the rose, That the mirage, Will become, Like an oasis, Are we still struggling, To get our feet, Onto the highway, Of our God, Again, To quote from, Bob Dylan, In his song, When he returns, He said, How long can I listen, To the lies, And prejudice, How long can I stay, Drunk on fear, Out in the wilderness, Can I cast it aside, All this loyalty, And this pride, Will I ever learn, That there will be no peace, That the war won't cease, Until he returns, And that's really, What this passage, Is eventually pointing forward to, The return, Of the Lord Jesus Christ, Because, He came to his people, In Old Testament times, In various ways, But at the end of time, He's going to return, To this world, Physically, And powerfully, And every eye, Will see him, And every tongue, Confess, That he is Lord, So, Enable, We need to ask God, To enable us, To take these lessons, To our own hearts, That we would rely, Upon this great, Salvation, Made available in Jesus Christ, This great salvation, Pictured so poetically here, In this passage, In Isaiah, Chapter 35, Let's pray, Our loving, Heavenly Father, We thank you, For the way, In which, The language of scripture, So beautifully, Pictures, The great blessings, Of salvation, We thank you, How there is, A correspondence, Between, What we see, In the world around us, In the natural world, And, The great spiritual realities, Concerning salvation, Concerning salvation, And we know, That this is again, Another evidence, Of your existence, Your wisdom, And your power, That all things, Coexist, And hold together, Through the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord, Our gracious God, We pray, That you would, Bless your own word to us, To bring us comfort, In our times, Of fear, And hopelessness, And enable us, To know, That there is a glorious future, Promised, To the people of God, So we ask these things, In Jesus name, And for his sake, Amen.

[24 : 15] Now we close, By singing to God's praise, In, Psalm 68, And we're singing there, Verses 7 to 11.

Now we're singing this, In the Scottish Psalter version, Psalm 68, From verse 7. O God, What time thou didst go forth, Before thy people's face, And when through the great wilderness, Thy glorious marching was.

Psalm 68, Verses 7 to 11, To God's praise.