

The Antidote to Arrogance

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[0 : 00] Do you keep that passage open before you, Isaiah 35, let's pray shall we? Heavenly Father we! Just warms our hearts to hear of the joy of the redeemed entering Zion with songs of singing.

And so Lord we come before you today as your people perhaps a little weary and worn down and we pray Lord show us this joy, place this joy in our hearts, fan these flames of hope in our souls that we might walk our way to glory with that joy in us. In Jesus name, Amen. Well can I start by saying a huge thank you to the huge group of you who made the church look so beautiful with your hard work yesterday morning. It looks and smells tremendous. Thank you too for everyone who brought some gifts along. They'll all be heading to the food bank early in the week and if you're able to help with that, that would be great. We could do with a few volunteers to help move all the food up.

Days like these are great aren't they? Days of celebration and joy when we give thanks for all that God has given us. But more than that, more than being at just a good time of celebration in themselves, they act as foretastes of heaven. They point us forward towards that day when Jesus will return. A day when all hunger and thirst will be no more. When the deserts bloom into perfect life.

When all fears get banished. When all sicknesses are healed. A day when sin and all its effects get washed away when death itself is no more. And strange as it might seem, that is where Isaiah is pointing us this morning. Now considering the rather gloomy passages we have looked at over the last four weeks, this chapter comes as a bit of a surprise in this chunk of the book. Because it is glorious from start to finish, isn't it? But remember that's why Isaiah brought those words of condemnation and challenge to the nations. So that the Babylonians and the Egyptians and the people from Tyre and the religious amongst God's own people might turn from their sin and know this joy and this eternal future.

This is the end of the story. This is the glorious end for all those who turn to Christ. Whatever nation they are from. And what better day to think about this final day of harvest than our harvest festival today. The days when our churches look and smell more beautiful than ever. And it's in this joy-filled glorious future that we find the antidote to all the arrogance we've seen over the last few weeks.

[2 : 49] The arrogance of power is shown to be empty because it's God who wins. It's his kingdom that comes. The arrogance of worldly wisdom is shown to be empty because eternity shows that all the things we have in this life are of no value compared to the next. The arrogance of religion is shown up too as well, isn't it? Because our salvation is all of the work of God. It is nothing to do with us.

So let's dive into this passage. Two things we're going to look at today. We're going to think about the world to come, the life to come, what it is like and who gets to go there. That's the really vital question for us today. And then secondly, we'll think about the life now as we are still walking on that road to this eternal joy. How do we keep our faith in the midst of the now, knowing that we're in Christ, but it's not yet, not what we have to come. So the life to come and the life now. If you want to do some extra reading when you get home, chapter 34 might be helpful because it gives us a dark contrast because it describes what those facing God's just judgment will be up against. It's a chapter that is terrible and a frightening prospect.

But wonderfully, that future does not need to be our fate because chapter 35 shows us the future that can be ours. So what do we see here? Three things. We see a renewal of creation.

Verses one and two, the parched lands will rejoice, the deserts will bloom. It's mirrored further down in verses six and seven, there is water flowing again in the desert, springs bubbling up in arid places, lush vegetation will return. Now for those of you worried about the future of animals, the fear, the future of these lions and jackals and ferocious beasts, well they're part of God's renewed creation too, only they will no longer be a threat. Doesn't say that in this passage. Isaiah 65 though describes a new kind of harmony that will exist in the new creation between the animal world and people. As the wolf lies down with the lamb, as the lion eats straw like an ox, no danger then.

In our age of environmental activism then, this is the ultimate rewilding project. But it is God who steps in and does the work and the effect is extraordinary. We live in a beautiful county, don't we? And it's wonderful to look out and see the glory of God in creation.

[5 : 28] But I tell you that is nothing to what the new creation will be like. Nothing at all. On those days, God's glory and splendour will be seen written large on his perfect restored world. A renewal then of creation. Secondly though, a renewal of society.

I think one of the worst things that can happen in any society is when justice is denied and the wicked are allowed to prosper. And if that's sometimes even true in a nation such as ours, with a long Christian heritage, with laws that are endlessly, it seems, scrutinised, where there are checks and balances in place, how awful must it be to live in a place where there is no true justice?

Where the poor are freely exploited? Where doing right leads to persecution? And where might is seen to be right, whether or not it is? Even when sometimes it's very wrong in deeds. That's why in almost every image that we have in the Bible of God's eternal kingdom, we see God not just sorting out the creation, but bringing true justice, acting as judge.

One who will hold the wicked to account for their wrongs and who will put things right. Societies stand and fall on true justice and wonderfully our God is the source of true righteousness as he renews society.

And so in Isaiah's wonderful vision, society gets renewed in justice. That's why the wicked and the foolish are excluded. And if that makes you feel a little nervous, after all, it's not too long ago in our service that we were having our time of confession.

[7 : 09] If we're honest, we all know all too well our own wickedness and foolishness. If you're thinking, well, does that mean I'm going to miss out? Well, hold on for just a moment, because this passage has some wonderful news for us.

There's a renewal of creation, there is a renewal of society, and thirdly, there is a renewal of God's people. Verse 5 and 6 describe the change. As the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and leap, the mute can sing for joy.

The joy of God's eternal kingdom will be seen in renewed bodies. Aren't we all looking forward to that one? All those aches and pains gone, glasses thrown away, walking frames, a thing of the past.

You're dancing like you're 18 again. Physical restoration is a glorious thing. And of course, that's what we see in Jesus' ministry, isn't it? Every time Jesus heals the sick, feeds the hungry, defeats evil, as we heard a little in our Gospel reading, as Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, we are pointed forward to this ultimate physical restoration.

That's what Isaiah is talking about here, but it's more than that. You remember when Isaiah started his ministry, he was told that although people had ears, they wouldn't be able to hear, or although they could see with their eyes, they didn't perceive anything.

[8 : 35] Well, what do we find here? We find that those walking along the road into God's kingdom are the ones who were once spiritually deaf and blind. They were the ones who would not and could not walk his way or acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

Something amazing has happened to them. What is it? Well, they're called the redeemed in verse 9, because they are the ones for whom a price has been paid to set them free from the curse of sin and death.

They were once under God's judgment for all the sins that we've looked at over the past few weeks, yet now their sin has been atoned for. Their wickedness has been covered over by robes of righteousness.

How has God done this? Well, Isaiah will explain this to us in later chapters, but we know the answer, don't we? Of course we do. God has stepped in and redeemed a people for himself through his son, Jesus.

This is our story. We are those walking this glorious road. When we were lost and helpless, blind, mute, death, it was Jesus who came and lived the life that we could never live.

[9 : 51] And at the end of his life, he died the death we deserve. And his death is the price for our redemption. So here is the good news we're after. Through the preaching of the gospel, through the work of the Holy Spirit in us, blind eyes have been opened to the glory of God.

Deaf ears have been unblocked and have heard the message of salvation. And so lame feet have been enabled to run into the arms of the Saviour and mute lips have been able to sing his praise.

Lips that once cursed him and denied him are now calling out, Jesus is Lord and praising God for his goodness. No wonder there is so much joy in this passage.

Those who are walking this road know that they have no right to be there. Yeah, there they are, walking their way to glory, singing songs of salvation, entering God's eternal kingdom, overflowing with everlasting joy.

A joy in this passage is all-consuming. Creation sings with joy. God's people sing with joy. In verse 10, this joy is described as a kind of joy that catches up with people unawares, as if you're walking towards a great party and celebration when the host of that party circles around behind you with a big band, and all of a sudden the party is there before you even reach the place.

[11 : 20] A renewal of creation, a renewal of society, a renewal of God's people. That's the glorious future that is to come. But before we move on and think about how we live with that future in a life that is so hard now, let me ask you this question.

Are you on that road? Are you on that road? Is that glorious new creation right now your certain eternal destiny?

Do you know the joy of the redeemed because you know for certain that Jesus is your saviour and your king? If you do, then the second part of the talk is clearly for you.

But if you don't know that yet, if you don't know Jesus as your Lord and saviour, then as you keep one ear out for what life in this world will be like for those who follow Jesus, can I suggest you flick back a little bit and look back at chapter 34, see the difference in these two futures.

chapter 34 with its condemnation and judgment. Chapter 35 with its joy and welcome. See, that is the choice that we all will face, the two roads in life.

[12 : 34] On that final day, Jesus will either be our judge or he will be our saviour. We'll either experience his just judgment for our rejection of him or he will stand and he will welcome us into his presence forever.

There are two roads through this life and into eternity. Which one are you on right now? And if you're not sure, please don't push that aside. There is no question you will ever think about that is more important than this.

Well, we've looked at the glorious life to come as Isaiah describes it to us. But what about this life now? How do we keep our faith in the now where there's all its mess, knowing that there is a perfect, glorious eternity to come?

We see the Bible wants us to be rightly excited about heaven, but it is also wonderfully honest about life now. The passage is not only meant to thrill us about the future, but it is here to keep us steady in the present where life is often harmed, where creation is still groaning, where our bodies are sadly crumbling, and where the foolish and the wicked exert far too much influence.

So how can we live with steadfast hope in the now and the not yet? How can we know God's joy as we wait for glory whilst living in the midst of so much pain and darkness?

[14 : 04] Well, Isaiah gives us three things to do. Here's the first one. We are to behold our God. Behold our God. That is the literal meaning of the phrase that's there in verse four.

Your God will come. See, if we're to stand firm in our faith, if we're to overcome our fears, then we must behold our God. That means spending time thinking about him, meditating on him, consciously and determinedly bringing to mind all of the things about God's glory and power, majesty and might.

It means consciously recalling his faithfulness throughout all generations. It means bringing to mind his saving work in our lives and through history. It means recalling his many and great promises to us, praising him for his graciousness in giving us Jesus.

Because the more we think about God and his greatness and love, the smaller our problems become in comparison. The more we think about God and his power and might, well, all these things that we worry about here actually are inconsequential in comparison.

I wonder if we need to do that more. Do you need to do that more? There are plenty of ways that we can. None of them are complicated. How about not letting a day go by where we don't open the scriptures and spend some time reading and thinking about God's word?

[15 : 34] And if you think, well, the Bible's a big complicated book, I don't know where to start, buy some Bible reading notes. Have someone guide you through it. If you don't like doing that on your own, join a home group.

I think we've got four within our church family right now, others across the parish. Meet up with some other Christians and read the Bible together. If that's a bit frightening, find one person, grab a coffee once a week.

Let's sit down and read a chapter of the Bible together and talk about it. And don't let a week go by, friends, without you being in church. Don't miss a week.

To stand firm, we need to behold God. We need to see more of him. Secondly, we need to walk the way of holiness. One of Judy's former vicars, long before I met her, had this wonderful phrase that she's passed on to me and it's stuck in my mind.

It's this, the obedient life is the blessed life. The obedient life is the blessed life. It doesn't mean that if we try, if we manage somehow to live a perfect Christian life, that we will have health and wealth and happiness now in full measure.

[16 : 47] If I'm honest, most of the most Christ-like people I know have lived lives that have been very difficult indeed. And of course, if you think about Jesus, the only perfect man there has ever been, he didn't get a life of health, wealth and happiness, did he?

He suffered more than anyone has ever suffered. Now, the phrase points us to a deeper truth that if we want to know more of God's peace now, more of his joy now, more of his power at work in our lives, in whatever circumstances God brings to us, then we need to be those who obey his commands.

Walk the road of holiness. Actually, that's a calling that we all have. It's what it means to be a disciple, to follow Jesus and follow his teaching. And it's a call to do all those little things that we hear about so often, to love our neighbours, to forgive our enemies, to serve willingly, to give generously, to pray constantly, to go wherever God calls us to go and do whatever he commands.

For as we do that, we are walking in step with Christ. Obedience to Jesus leads to a closer fellowship with Jesus. Perhaps, like Paul, it will lead to a greater fellowship in Jesus' suffering, but that's okay because there is a particular kind of joy that is ours if we suffer for the name of Christ.

That's where true joy is found. So what things in our lives do we need to repent and change direction? What things do we need to stop doing so we can start doing what's right?

[18 : 27] Where do we need to embrace the hard road to ensure that we are walking the close to Jesus road? I'm sure you'll know already. Deep down, you'll know what those things are.

That will be the Holy Spirit at work in your life convicting you of those things. Listen to that voice. Obey Jesus and your joy in the Lord will increase.

The second way we live faithfully in the now and not yet is to walk the road of holiness. Here's the last one. And this takes us back to our celebration today and it's to live with an attitude of gratitude.

Get that phrase in your head. An attitude of gratitude. See, the joyful songs of those walking the way of holiness are fuelled with thankfulness for who God is, for all that he has done and for everything he's given.

On days like this, it's easy, isn't it? You look around and you go, oh, and those flowers, great. Look at all that food. Isn't that amazing? These music that we're singing today, isn't it great? On days like this, it's easy.

[19 : 33] We see all of God's gifts laid out around us and we can't help but be thankful. But not every day is a celebration day. Not every day is like this. And the challenge is to live with an attitude of gratitude every day, whatever it brings.

On the really happy days and the hard, tough, grief-filled, darker days. You see, unless Jesus comes back tonight or God calls us home to be with him, the sun will rise tomorrow morning.

And as you wake up, will you be honestly thankful to God for another day of life? Will that be one of your first thoughts? Tomorrow you will eat food again. Maybe not with the abundance of everything that's here or all the food we had last night, but enough to sustain you.

It will be a gift from God. Will your heart rise to thankfulness to him for all that you're about to enjoy? Tomorrow you'll hopefully put some clothes on again.

You'll speak with those who love you again. You'll see God's creation again. You'll hear the birds again. You'll meet up with friends and listen to music again. You will walk and rest and so much more.

[20 : 43] And none of these things is your right. None of these things are our rights. All of them are gifts from our glorious Heavenly Father.

Each day, each breath, each good gift comes from the hand of the Father above. How thankful are we for these things? And don't forget the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ.

These are far more valuable forgiveness, redemption, hope, peace, adoption, and belonging into God's family. The fact that God's own Holy Spirit is in us.

In our lives to work and change us and equip us for service. The fact that he has called us along with others to share the good news of Jesus. What a privilege.

We're not left on the sidelines. Jesus says, no, no, no, come and join me in my work. How thankful are you for those spiritual blessings today? How thankful will you be tomorrow?

[21 : 43] Or on Wednesday or Thursday when it's a little darker and a little colder? how thankful are we? If we're honest, none of us are thankful enough. But here's the thing, every time we praise God and thank him for what we've received, our confidence in God's goodness and eternal promises grow.

Do you get that? Every time we thank him for what we've received now, our confidence for what he has promised us in the world to come increases. The fires of our joy is stoked.

Our attitude of gratitude and confidence in God shines more brightly the more thankful we are. Not every day is a harvest day of thankfulness and celebration.

I know that. On some days we feel empty and hard pressed. We feel dry and worn out. Maybe, if you're honest, that's a little how you feel this morning. Sometimes we feel very distant from God.

a long way from the joys of Isaiah 35. But as we behold God, as we walk the way of holiness, as we develop an attitude of gratitude, even the darkest and hardest days get showered with blessings and new joys.

[23 : 02] Brothers and sisters, that's how we keep walking the way to Zion with songs of hope and joy in our hearts. That's how we can stand firm in the midst of a Christian life, which is a real mixture of the joys of now and the greater joys of what is to come.

What is it about Isaiah's vision of the eternity to come that has thrilled your heart most this morning? As you think about eternity, is it the reunion with fellow believers?

is it the end to suffering and pain? Is it a renewed world where there is no more fighting, no more factions, no more terrorism or pain and death?

Is it an end to your own weaknesses, whether physical or spiritual? You think, oh, I can't wait until I'm made more like Christ. Or is it the joy of being with Jesus and seeing God in his glory?

They are all wonderful things. They are all things that God has prepared for those who love him. In just a little way, days like this are a foretaste of that.

[24 : 10] So may God fill our hearts with renewed joy in his blessings, renewed confidence in his promises and keep us faithful and strong as we walk the road to Zion and wait for the coming of our conquering king.

Amen. Amen.