

Christ's advent brings joy to the redeemed Isaiah 35:1-10

¹ The wilderness and the desert will be glad. The wasteland of the Arabah will rejoice and blossom like a crocus. ² It will bloom lavishly, and there will be great joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. It will be excellent like Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make the shaky knees steady. ⁴ Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid. Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you. ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. ⁶ The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland. ⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water. There will be grass, reeds, and rushes where the haunts of jackals once lay. ⁸ A highway will be there, a road that will be called the holy way. The impure will not walk there. It will be reserved for those who walk in that holy way. Wicked fools will not wander onto it. ⁹ No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious animal go up on it. They will not be found there, but only the redeemed will walk there. ¹⁰ Then those ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with a joyful shout, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. Happiness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The word of God before us and the chapter before that bring to a close the first part of Isaiah's prophecy. Both chapters prophecy the coming of the Messiah. The chapter before our text uses very graphic pictures to describe the judgment he will bring to all the wicked. But the chapter before us has a different message. It is one of hope and restoration. It is actually a prelude to the second half of Isaiah. The fulfillment of Isaiah's promises comes only in the advent of the Messiah. And as we consider the beautiful pictures that Isaiah chapter 35 paints, we're going to see that Christ's advent brings joy to the redeemed.

The first picture is a drastic change that takes place in a wasteland. *The wilderness and the desert will be glad. The wasteland of the Arabah will rejoice and blossom like a crocus. ² It will bloom lavishly, and there will be great joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. It will be excellent like Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.* The Arabah is that dry and rugged stretch of land that ran from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. What a change is made there! The land of Judah becomes a plush oasis, and earthly paradise. The prophet mentions three regions that are famous for its fertility and beauty. Lebanon was famous for its fragrant cedars. Carmel had its mighty oaks. And Sharon is celebrated for its flowers and rich pastureland. The desert naturally blooms with its own native flowers. But Isaiah pictures an unnatural beauty that occurs at the advent of Messiah.

This beauty in nature describes the beauty of God's grace and his love for his people. As parched and dry as his people are spiritually, the Lord would remember his covenant. He would alter their fortunes by grace. Where they could not bring forth beauty on their own, God would graciously bring it to them. Grace is always unnatural to human soil. It can only

occur if God acts. The Lord does not hide his work. It is for all to see. What a great change it brings. The true beauty, glory and honor of God is made manifest at the advent of Christ.

The desert looks like a plush oasis for the Savior is coming. He is the glory of the Lord and the splendor of our God. And God's prophet has a message for all who wait for his arrival. *Strengthen the weak hands, and make the shaky knees steady. Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid. Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God's own retribution, he will come and save you.* Those who lack courage, those who have lost the ability to move forward without assurance, those who run away at every threat, they have an invitation that is recorded throughout Scripture: "Fear not." God has not forgotten his promise. He has not deserted his people. The Savior will come.

This chapter speaks of comfort that the Christians have in their daily conflict with sin, Satan, and the world. We may look defeated and in distress. We appear poor and wretched. Yet we are comforted and strengthened by the good news that our Savior is coming. God's people are always comforted by the coming of Christ. Outwardly Christians may look like wastelands, but inwardly they are lavish oases, refreshed and nourished by the forgiveness and salvation of Christ. The Savior comes to heal our spiritual defects. When he comes, he brings about a radical change in the world. Just as the desert will bloom with unnatural beauty, so God's people will receive a radical change with the advent of Christ. The prophet describes it: *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy.* When John the Baptist was imprisoned and he wondered if his cousin from Nazareth might be the Christ, Jesus sent this word back to him, "Go report to John what you hear and see: *the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor. Blessed is the one who does not take offense at me*" (Matthew 11:4-6). Finally the Christ had arrived. And there was joy for all of God's people.

We have the privilege of seeing how God fulfilled his promises through his Son, Jesus Christ. Sin has infected every soul on earth. Every human can be described as nothing more than a wasteland. But Christ has made all things right again. He has removed our sin, taking them all to a cursed cross. There he paid the ultimate price to free us from sin's punishment. He's made us brilliant and beautiful in the eyes of our God. He has replaced our sin with his record of obedience. Every act of love that he lived is now seen in us. And every sin-infected attempt we make at loving God and others, they all get cleansed in the precious blood of our Savior. So we come off looking pure and holy like Jesus himself. All that can leave us with is pure joy. Yes, we are the redeemed that this Scripture pictures.

The prophet describes a beautiful oasis. And the picture continues: *Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland. The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water. There will be grass, reeds, and rushes where the haunts of jackals once lay.* "More deceitful than a mirage" is an Arabic proverb. Often in

the desert, the appearance of a great sheet of water not only misleads a traveler. It aggravates his thirst with disappointment. How often are we disappointed by our world that holds out what appears to be water and nourishment for our souls. But they are only mirages that do not satisfy our soul nor nourish our faith. Only the gospel can bring such nourishment. Through God's Word and the Spirit, we are not disappointed. In the gospel we drink from the springs of living water that Lord himself gives us.

And we now have a safe place to enjoy what our Savior has brought us. Isaiah describes it as a highway. The roads in Isaiah's days were more like paths that were crooked and full of potholes and obstacles. But since the advent of our Savior, we have a different path to follow. *A highway will be there, a road that will be called the holy way. Wicked fools will not wander onto it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious animal go up on it. They will not be found there, but only the redeemed will walk there.* We are not traveling on a crooked path full of robbers and thieves. The prophet describes a joyful place, that is safe from all the temptations of Satan. Those who enter the path that leads to life find no cause for alarm. Their fear subsides. Their consciences are not burdened with sin and guilt. Their Savior has taken care of that. Instead the redeemed of the Lord live in peace. God has smoothed out the way to heaven for them. It follows straight through their Savior who is the only way to the Father. Believers know that though they are unclean sinners, sin, Satan, and God's law can no longer condemn them. Their Lord has set them free. He is their deliverer. It's not their zeal or works of anything they have done. It's the blood of Christ that redeems them and the gospel that calls them, gathers them, and enlightens them to be a part of his church. *Then those ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with a joyful shout, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. Happiness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

What wonderful pictures the prophet gives us in this Scripture. The world without God's promises is a parched and dry desert. Whatever seems to be nourishment for the soul is but a mirage without the sacrificial life and death of Christ. Through the gospel God gives us an oasis of rest. It may appear like anything but an oasis. Satan continues to fight against us. His temptations come continually. The world can only deceive us with its mirages. But our hope is that when the Lord comes again, we will live in the church triumphant, free from all sadness, sorrow, and sin. So we see that the first coming of Christ is tied together with his second coming. With his first arrival, he made all things right between us sinners and our holy God. We are now the redeemed. We are strengthened in the midst of earthly trials. Our Lord came once for us. He will come again for us. He has defeated our enemies. He has granted us salvation. What rich comfort we have in Christ's advent as the babe of Bethlehem and our eternal Judge of all mankind.

You and I are traveling the same journey. It may not seem easy, not in this world. But you don't travel it alone. Your Savior is with you the whole way. Nothing can harm you there. Though not easy, we continue the journey, from cradle, to cross, to crown. Christ did it. We can follow. Christ's advent has filled us with joy.