

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; Your presence is more precious to us as each day goes by. We yearn for Your friendship, Your compassion, Your healing, Your encouragement and Your salvation. In this season of 'goodwill', come to us afresh and challenge us to go further in our love, our generosity and our compassion.., In this way, may we show that Your presence has made a difference to our lives. We praise You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: AID

1. For yourself

Submit to the Lord your feelings about this coming Christmas time, whether this be your feelings about others, the festival or about your faith in Christ. Be honest with God today and let Him hear your true voice. Then, listen to His.

2. For your friends and family

Submit your feelings about your family to the Lord, whether good or bad or whether you look forward to the festival or not. Bless the members of your family in prayer, and seek to bless them in what you do, from now on

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the services that will take place in your church this coming Christmas day.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who deliver the news. Pray that they will be faithful to their task, and convey the needs of the world as well as its 'gossip'.

Meditation

Speak to us in words of prophecy, Lord God

So we may discern the truth of Your Word

Speak to us in words of challenge and vision

So we may be willing to be tested to our limits

Speak to us in words of love and comfort

So we may be empowered by them for action

Speak to us in words of wisdom and revelation

So we may be fed by them, day and night

Speak to us in words of faith and sound teaching

So we may accept the Bible's truth and honesty

Speak to us in words used by the Lord to bless the crowds

So we may use them again to bless our troubled world

Speak to us in words which change all things for good

So we may grasp them now, and never let them go ... for ever.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 35:1-10

¹ *The wilderness and the dry land will be glad,*

- the desert will rejoice and blossom;
² It will burst into bloom like the crocus,
and rejoice with joyful song.
It will be given the glory of Lebanon,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.*
- ³ Strengthen the hands of the weak,
make steady those with frail knees.*
- ⁴ Say to the fearful hearted,
‘Be strong, do not fear!
Look, here is your God!
Vengeance will come!
A divine reckoning!
He will come and save you.’*
- ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared;*
- ⁶ then the lame will leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the dumb will sing out.
For waters will break into the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*
- ⁷ the burning sand will become a pool,
and parched land become springs of water;
the place where jackals lay
will be marshland with reeds and rushes.*
- ⁸ A highway shall be there,
a road called the Holy Way;
no unclean person may travel on it,
but it will be for those who travel ‘The Way’;
no fools may wander there.*
- ⁹ No lion will be there,
No fearful beast will mount on it;
these will not be found there,
but the redeemed will walk there.*
- ¹⁰ The ransomed of the LORD will return,
and come into Zion with singing;
they will be crowned with joy everlasting,
and overcome with rejoicing and gladness;
for sorrow and sighing will flee away!*

Review

What a wonderful and powerful description of God’s future, of His ‘Kingdom’, in which all things will live at peace. God will make a pathway by which His people gain access to this His glorious world.

To read this passage is to tap into a great spiritual treasure which has inspired people for centuries, because it describes a journey of return from judgement into the arms of God. We have jumped forward to this chapter of Isaiah from the famous ‘apocalyptic’ prophecies in chapters 24 to 27, missing out a variety of prophecies about Jerusalem, Egypt, the leadership of God’s people and God’s promises to Zion (chapters 28-34). Many of these are fascinating, but they do not add significantly to our knowledge of Isaiah’s message at this particular point in our studies. Nevertheless, the theme of God’s ultimate and complete victory has carried across from earlier passages, and this wonderful chapter is a prophecy about the triumphant entry of God’s people into His glorious Kingdom!

Without doubt, the first people who heard this prophecy looked forward to a return from exile to the Promised Land; perhaps they were some of the people of Israel who longed to return after the Assyrian invasion in 721BC, but it is more likely they were the people of Judah and Jerusalem who anticipated their return to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile (from 538BC onwards). The sense of justice and relief within this prophecy is palpable, and some feel that the writer must have witnessed one of these historical ‘returns’ of

God's people in person, in order to write as graphically as this. Yet I doubt that this passage was merely a description of an event which someone had seen. Many of its themes are to be found in the prophecies already spoken by Isaiah, so after all the warfare and judgement which Isaiah prophesied because of the sins of God's people, this magnificent poem sums up Isaiah's great optimism for the future of God's rule, and it retains the feel of a prophetic vision of something yet to happen. Even though some Israelites did return to the Promised Land after the Assyrian invasion, and Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah and others did return to Jerusalem after the Exile (Ezra 1:1f., Nehemiah 7:7f.), this poem still has more to say about God's future than they could have known or experienced.

The passage falls into four sections, each with a significant theme. The first theme is the evidence of the glory of the Lord (35:1,2); the second theme is the salvation and encouragement of God's people (35:3,4); the third theme is the liberating power of God which affects people and land (35:5,6,7), and the fourth theme is that of a pathway to God's glory in a heavenly Zion (35:8,9,10)! The whole poem gradually builds up to this magnificent proclamation; 'The ransomed of the Lord will return and come into Zion with singing!' (35:10) The conclusion itself should tell us that along with other parts of Isaiah (notably chapters 24 to 27) this prophecy reaches far beyond the mere circumstances of Old Testament times, describing what the Lord will do to bring His people into the Land of His glorious, perfect and holy Kingdom!

In this passage Isaiah describes worship, the glory of the Lord, the power of God's Spirit to heal, empower and save, and the path of holiness and righteousness which leads to heaven. There is plenty here for a Christian preacher to expound; what more could be asked of an Old Testament text? This prophecy breaks open God's providential plan for the salvation of the world and of His people. It does not tell us details about how God will make this happen, but more than any other passage of the Old Testament, it describes the Kingdom of God in a way which connects strongly with what we know of the life of Jesus and also with what He said about God's ultimate purpose for His Kingdom.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the text and translation
- The evidence of God's glory (35:1,2)
- Encouragement and salvation (35:3,4)
- The power of God at work in our midst (35:5,6,7)
- The Highway, the 'Holy Way' (35:8-10)

Notes on the text and translation

- V1/2** *At the end of verse 1, the Hebrew text has the words 'like the crocus', which I have placed within verse 2. The reason for this is that this phrase is linked to what comes next in verse 2, describing the spectacular sight of crocuses blooming in the desert. This makes more sense to me than leaving the phrase tacked on to the end of verse 1 as you will find in some translations.*
- V3** *The phrase 'strengthen the hands of the weak' requires that the second half of the verse is also translated personally; 'make steady those with frail knees'. Most translations have 'make firm the feeble knees'; but this is too abstract when we are clearly talking about real people.*
- V4** *After the dramatic words 'Here is your God!' the next two phrases appear awkward in Hebrew. I have taken them to be a shout of triumph for what God has come to bring, that is, a day of vengeance which is a just reckoning. This describes the very nature of salvation.(see study below).*
- V7** *The second half of this verse which describes the place 'where jackals lie' is strange. The Hebrew is very unclear and few translations are the same. The word for jackal is unclear as are the words relating to it; they could mean the dwelling of some kind of mythical sea monster, for example! Because this does not make sense here in the prophecy, I have followed the logic of making a parallel with the first half of the verse and concluded that it is about a land for prowling jackals which in God's providence will become marshlands.*
- V8** *Verse 8 begins with three Hebrew words; 'highway, 'road' and 'Holy Way'. Most versions of the Bible find a way of dropping the word 'road' because it appears repetitive, though I have included it in a way which makes perfectly good sense.*
- V8** *In the middle of the verse is a phrase which I have translated fairly literally; 'it will be for those who travel the 'Way'. The complexities of this phrase in Hebrew mean that the translation is uncertain. However, Isaiah was clearly talking about a special pathway with a name; the 'Way'.*
- V8** *The phrase 'no fools may wander there' at the end of the verse is very different from what you will find in some translations, for example, the English Standard has 'even if they are fools, they shall not go*

astray' which virtually reverses the meaning! Are fools allowed on 'the Way' or not? The Hebrew says literally 'the fools will not wander about', and I feel that my translation is more in keeping with the flow of what Isaiah says, which is that the pathway is one of clear direction which has no place for 'fools'. This fits with what comes next in v9.

This is what we will now explore in more depth. Each section of the poem powerfully connects Old Testament and New, and it powerfully illustrates the Kingdom of God, the Gospel, and the End Times. There is a wealth of illustration and visual imagery in this passage which is both absorbing and stunning; a truly unforgettable passage of Old Testament scripture.

The evidence of God's glory (35:1,2)

The whole prophecy commences with a magnificent and colourful image of the desert bursting into bloom with crocuses! Those who have seen the desert regions of the Middle East come alive with colour at certain seasons tell of this superb sight with awe. God has the power to do remarkable things in His own world, and occasionally we obtain a glimpse of it. However, this picture has meaning. It was the wilderness and the dry land which would see the incredible sight of the glory and majesty of God, not the city, or the land of Canaan. In Israelite thought, the wilderness was a place of journeying because of the experience of the Exodus from Egypt under Moses, and Isaiah therefore anticipated another 'journey through the wilderness' in order to reach the new 'Promised Land' of God's perfect Kingdom, and 'Zion' (35:10).

Putting this together, Isaiah prophesied a new journey for God's people through the wilderness which though barren, would hold within it the amazing evidence of God's glory, just like the crocuses flowering in the desert. We are now able to say that this journey is the journey of God's people now in the tough and hard world we endure. However, like the flowering of crocuses showing God's glory, we have Jesus Christ as the evidence of God's splendour and majesty. We can say that He flowers in our desert to give us the hope of our eventual arrival in God's heavenly 'Promised Land'!

Encouragement and salvation (35:3,4)

The first four lines of this part of the prophecy sound like the encouragement of one who is tired and weary on the pathway through the desert! 'Strengthen the hands of the weak, make steady those with frail knees ...' (35:3). People have to help each other on a long and difficult journey, and the words of this text indicate just this. No-one is chastised for being weary or faint or for having physical frailty. The voice speaking seems to be a fellow traveller, anonymously saying within the song some words of godly encouragement which all of us need to hear. These words are echoed in other scriptures, e.g. Psalm 35:10, and 1 Cor 1:27, and are also in the song 'Give Thanks'; 'and now, let the weak say 'I am strong' ...'

On this difficult journey to return to the Lord, it was revealed to Isaiah that people would be able to see their God! The whole idea would have been unacceptable to traditional Judeans and Israelites who believed that no-one could look on God and live (Ex 3:6 etc.), so what is said in verse 4 is astonishing. 'Look, here is your God!' is a remarkable call, but the idea that people could see their God was not new to Isaiah because he had already prophesied that God would come as a child to be 'with us' (7:14). Now Isaiah had moved on from the picture of a child, for he prophesied that God would come in judgement ('a divine reckoning'), and 'He will come and save you!' God will be present with His people, saving them, encouraging them and urging them on. Is He the one who says to the fearful 'be strong, do not fear'? These words may come to any of us through the lips of others, but behind them, is the Lord at work urging us to trust Him and have confidence?

The power of God at work in our midst (35:5,6,7)

These verses are split between the evidence of God's power at work in people (the first four lines) and the evidence of God's power to transform the desert (the rest of verse 6 and verse 7). Isaiah prophesied frequently about the opening of people's eyes and ears (e.g. 29:9,18; 42:7,18; 43:8 etc.), and this goes back to his calling in chapter 6 where the Lord predicted that people would be 'dull' and 'uncomprehending' until His judgement was complete and His salvation was made real through the 'holy seed' (6:10-13). Having been given this terrible word to describe the intransigence of God's people in his own time, it was natural that Isaiah longed to see the day when these shackles were removed from humanity. He did not foresee merely the miracles which Jesus did which opened people eyes and enabled the dumb to speak (e.g. Matt 21:14, Mark 10:46), but the fact that these miracles pointed to something far greater; the presence of God with His people opening their eyes to all truth and opening their ears to hear the Word of God!

The continued evidence of God's concern for the land is found in verse 7, which gives us a picture of the Lord doing a similar work for the land as He does for people. God knows that people cannot live or have meaning without a place to live, and His heavenly Kingdom includes a place to live which is redeemed and remade, just as we are redeemed and remade. When our earth is parched and worn out, the Lord will make it anew!

The Highway, the 'Holy Way' (35:8-10)

Isaiah saw a vision of a roadway through the desert. The word 'road' or 'pathway' (in Hebrew, 'derek') is repeated three times in verse 8 to indicate through repetition the importance of the theme. All God's people are on a journey, and it is God's pathway they follow, not their own. The whole idea should not be lost on Christians who know these words from Jesus' teaching about the pathway of salvation; 'enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction ... and the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life ...' (Matt 7:13,14). Also, John the Baptist proclaimed the saving work of Jesus with these words; 'prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!' (Matt 3:3 etc.). The prophetic vision of Isaiah however is of a pathway that is holy because it is God's way, and because the Lord is with His people, journeying to Zion! It is not for those who are not dedicated and purposeful in faith, in other words, the 'foolish' who have no right to wander on God's pathways (35:8). In addition, the holiness of the pathway means that it holds no potential disasters, save wandering from it! 'No fearful beast will mount it, these will not be found there' (35:9).

The last verse of this prophetic vision describes the end of the journey! God's blessing of His people at journey's end! This is a picture which is intended to inspire us and it is like the New Testament descriptions of glory and the coming of Christ. One feature of this verse is that it is devoid of fear and threat or judgement or condemnation. There is only joy and singing, and victory! This is God's intention for all His creation; perfection in joy and happiness of a kind we have not seen on this earth!

Discipleship

Application

It is almost impossible to encompass a vision such as this within a small study, but it is important that we try to embrace the sheer size and enormity of Isaiah's vision. Out of everything he had learned about God in a life which included much drama, he had learned to trust in God so completely that his report of this prophetic vision is utterly convincing. It describes the journey God's people are on, yet one which will be complete only in heaven, yet it is a journey which is assured because of the presence of God with His people in salvation and blessing.

This whole passage is one which encourages God's people to worship and praise Him for His salvation and His wondrous works! There are many things that happen to people in this life, and it is easy for any of us to feel down or disheartened. This is a passage designed to lift our spirits and remind us of the immense privilege we have of sharing in the journey of God's blessing. Isaiah saw this vision before Jesus came, but he saw enough of the glory of God to know that it was incomparable. Our churches today would be greatly blessed if we were to submit to the joy of Jesus' presence and the disciplines of our journey together in mutual friendship, support and care. We know that things will not be perfect, but we know that we have an objective which is clear and sure, and has been prophesied and set before God's people for centuries. There is no reason for us to fear the Living God, and His purposes for us are good; they are salvation, liberation, victory, joy and happiness, and every good thing we can find in this passage of scripture! Thank God!

Questions for groups

1. How is God's greatness shown in the natural world we see around us. Share examples in your group.
2. How important are miracles (opening the eyes of the blind etc.) for the proclaiming of the Kingdom of God?
3. How can the church of God help its members understand that they are on a spiritual journey?

Discipleship challenges

- Write down a description of the highlights and some of the low points in your spiritual journey. What can you learn from this?
- What does it mean to you to think of heaven as a place which is like earth, but redeemed? Discuss this with a friend if you can.
- Is joy a central feature of your life? Use the words of 35:10 as a prayer over a period of time and use it to help you praise God.

Final Prayer

How can we thank You, heavenly Father, for the immense privilege of being Your children, knowing that You have given us an eternal inheritance which goes beyond death and grants us a place in eternity! Glory be to You, our Father who is in heaven! Alleluia! AMEN
