

Advent 3, December 14, 2025

ISAIAH 35:1–10. (EHV)

The wilderness and the desert will be glad.
The wasteland of the Arabah will rejoice and blossom like a crocus.
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.

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.

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.
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.
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.
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.
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.

As you enter eastern Colorado on either I-76 or I-70, there isn't much to see. But after you've traveled some miles, suddenly you can make out the Rocky Mountains on the horizon. They look beautiful, and it's about the only thing you want to look at as you approach Denver.

But if you then go through Denver and actually enter the Rocky Mountains, there's almost no point of comparison between what you saw as you approached and what you see as you are now driving through the mountains. Oh sure, what you saw as you approached was real, but all those tall peaks were together. Now you see how many miles separated them, and all the beautiful terrain in between.

That's kind of what Old Testament prophecy is like. The prophets were viewing the mountains from afar, and they simply described what they saw. Second Samuel 7 is a classic example. There Nathan prophesies to David that he will not be the one to build a house for the Lord, but that a son from his own body will be the one to do so. And as you're reading the prophecy, you're thinking, "Solomon," since Solomon was David's son who built the temple.

But then Nathan, speaking for the Lord, says, "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever," and he talks about him being punished with the rod and with floggings. And suddenly you realize, "He's not just talking about Solomon. He's ultimately talking about Jesus and his Church." Solomon was a minor, imperfect fulfillment. Jesus was the major, perfect fulfillment. It was all part of the same view for the prophet Nathan, but with miles in between the peaks.

We have now looked at two prophecies of Isaiah. In the first one, we saw an establishment beyond all the mountains, the holy Christian Church. In the second one, we saw the Church's ruler, Jesus. In both of those prophecies, we saw this same prophetic perspective. We talked about the peace and victory over death that the holy Christian Church enjoys now by faith, and the perfect peace and victory we will enjoy one day in heaven.

Today is no different. Today Isaiah once again lifts our eyes to behold the beyond. We already beheld the mountain on which we live. We already beheld the Ruler of the mountain. Now we zoom out from the Ruler and zoom in on the hearts of the citizens. Today Isaiah wants us to behold the joy beyond expression that believers have.

I call it joy beyond expression, not because Isaiah tells us that it's beyond expression, but because that's the impression one gets after listening to Isaiah try to express it. His picture language is once again so rich that we can hardly give every verse the time it deserves. We can only briefly describe all the pictures.

If you were in Jerusalem when Isaiah spoke these words, you would have to lift up your mind's eye from Jerusalem and head east or south—east to the wilderness and dry land around and beyond the Jordan River, south to the dry plains west of the Dead Sea and south of the Dead Sea. They weren't places that people were dying to live in, and those who did live there weren't the happiest, most prosperous people on earth. They were places of shrubs, rocks, heat, and scavenging or predator animals.

Isaiah tells us to imagine this land opening its mouth and starting to sing and shout for joy to the Lord. He tells us to imagine beautiful flowers of different shades of purple and white blooming and beautiful green trees popping up all over the place. "The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. It will be excellent like Carmel and Sharon." Lebanon in the north was known for its cedar trees. Mt. Carmel to the northwest on the edge of the sea and the Plain of Sharon along the coast to the south of it were known for their fertile pastureland and farmland. We might think of the Napa Valley in California, where there are vineyards galore. Isaiah says, "Take all that fertility, and transfer it to the desert."

Later Isaiah continues the picture, telling us to imagine chunks of this dry land turning into refreshing pools, and cracked and crusty earth turning into bubbling springs. Where the jackal used to lie, there is now so much water that water-plants like reeds and rushes are growing there. Lake Manly is located in the Badwater Basin in Death Valley National Park in California, the lowest point in the United States. Since Lake Manly, the Badwater Basin, and Death Valley are in the Mojave Desert, Lake Manly is usually a misnomer, because it is nothing but a dry, crusty, cracked desert floor. But on the rare occasions when the area gets significant rainfall, the lakebed fills with water and is rightly called a lake. That's actually the case right now due to recent significant, record-breaking rainfall. Isaiah is having us imagine something similar, only it's permanently watered and permanently lush, not just a rare, newsworthy phenomenon. It's filled with good, clear, drinkable water, not stale and stagnant bad water.

So here is this beautiful, never-ending oasis, gentle on your eyes and restorative for your mind and soul. And running straight down the middle of it is a highway. Now of course, since Isaiah is the one prophesying about this, we shouldn't imagine a busy four-lane interstate with cars rushing back and forth. But we call our highways "highways" for the same reason that ancient well-traveled roads were called highways. They were and are just that—high ways, roads raised above the terrain around them, smooth on top with firm banks on the side. So this is a busy highway, in the sense that it is filled with travelers, but listen to how the travelers are described:

"The impure [*or* unclean] will not walk there. It will be reserved for those who walk in that holy way. Wicked fools will not wander onto it." On Israel's highways and byways there was always the chance you might come across unclean people. You constantly had to keep your ears open when encountering any traveler. If the traveler called out, "Unclean! Unclean!" you had to identify where it was coming from and avoid that person, so that you did not become diseased like he or she was, and so that you were not prohibited from worship or from regular interaction in society as a result. Travelers were regularly reminded of mankind's miserable plight when traveling. But there are no unclean people on this road.

Isaiah also says that not just any old person who wishes to take a road is there. There are no fools wandering about on it. You know how dangerous traveling can be when the roads you are traveling on are filled either with people who are just driving for no reason, and thus possibly not paying attention to what's going on around them, or filled with fools, who either have no idea how to drive or are actually out to cause mischief. This highway through the oasis isn't like that. No random travelers. No fools.

"No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious animal go up on it." The other danger to travelers in Isaiah's day was animals. A hungry lion might occasionally attack or frighten a traveler. We're even told in 1 Kings 13 about a man of God who was returning home to Judah, and a lion met him on the road and killed him.

Today, surrounded by the sturdy metal of our cars and traveling faster than most animals can run, we're not worried about animals catching us. But animals are still a concern. We're worried about catching animals. Animals like deer and turkeys can cause serious damage to our vehicles and even, on occasion, to our lives. But there is no danger from animals on this road.

There is only one kind of traveler on this highway through the oasis: "But only the redeemed will walk there. 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.” *To redeem* literally means *to buy back*. It was originally used in commerce, such as with slaves or property that one had lost. But it came to be used more broadly for rescuing from any less-than-ideal situation.

All those who travel this highway in the oasis are rescued, redeemed, ransomed. They have been in a place where there was no hope. But the LORD went to get them and he bought them back and brought them back.

Here we see once again that Isaiah intends this as picture language. He has told us that this highway was in the middle of the wilderness and dry regions, far away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not a wilderness and the land around it is not either. Then he told us that the redeemed of the LORD are the only ones traveling this highway in the desert-turned-oasis far away from Jerusalem. But now he describes them as coming to Zion, coming home to Zion. He is mixing all sorts of metaphors to capture the beauty and joy of the period and activity he is describing.

Since all the people traveling this highway, or returning to Zion, whichever picture you prefer, are rescued people who have been transplanted from dire straits into beautiful and safe surroundings, they are exceedingly happy. They shout for joy. Everlasting joy crowns their head; it is like a halo constantly hovering over them and affecting everything they do and say. The EHV says that happiness and joy will overtake them, but the Hebrew says that they overtake happiness and joy. Up until now, happiness and joy had eluded them and been out of their reach, but now they have finally caught up to it. It is theirs. And even as they overtake happiness and joy, sorrow and sighing are leaving, and they cannot flee quickly enough.

What in all the world can such a beautiful, heart-gladdening picture be referring to? When will this take place?

You may have noticed that I skipped over a section. I want to come back to it now, because it helps us to answer when this will be fulfilled: “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. 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. [For] waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland.”

Did you hear? “Your God will come with vengeance.” Isaiah said. “[He will come] with God’s own retribution,” he said. But he’s not coming to take vengeance and to bring retribution on you. “He will come and save you.” And that is a perfect segue into the next section, because it tells us in whom this prophecy is fulfilled.

We heard about John the Baptist in the Gospel from Matthew 11. While he was in prison, he sent some of his disciples to visit Jesus and ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”

And do you remember Jesus’s answer? “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.” In other words, Jesus is basically saying, “Isaiah 35 was prophesying the coming of the Messiah, and my ministry clearly demonstrates that I am he.”

Jesus is the one whom God sent to take vengeance on our enemies. Jesus is the one whom God sent to save us. Jesus was able to undo the effects of sin—blindness, deafness, lameness, and sickness—because he came to take away sin itself. He took vengeance on sin and Satan. He brought retribution on them. He defeated them.

And so the joy described here in Isaiah 35 is our joy. The holy way described here in Isaiah 35 runs through Trinity. You all are walking on it even as you sit here. You all are walking on it even as you go about your tasks during the week. You are the ones returning to Zion. You are the ones overtaking happiness and joy, which were out of your reach before you knew and believed in Jesus. Why? Because in Jesus your sin is taken away.

But you might say, “But what about the blind getting sight, the deaf getting their hearing, the lame leaping like a deer, the mute shouting for joy? Where are these blessings and benefits today?” Jesus performed these physical miracles so that you might see that he is also the source of the greatest and most lasting joy—the joy of sins forgiven and peace with God.

But one day you, too, will experience these things by sight—in heaven. Once again, Isaiah is looking at a mountain range in the distance. He sees one peak right next to another, even though they are separated in time. He sees the one peak—the spiritual joy beyond expression that we have now by faith in Christ. And he sees right next to it the other peak—the physical and eternal joy beyond expression we will have by faith and by sight in the presence of Christ in heaven.

You who have lost Christian loved ones know this joy beyond expression well. After all, how do you describe it when, even as the tears are falling from your eyes in choking sobs as you say good-bye, joy is still welling up in your heart from the knowledge that sorrow and sighing have fled away from this person you love forever, from the knowledge that he or she is with Jesus, and that because of Jesus you will see him or her again? It is a rock-bed of joy beneath a river of sadness, a field of crocuses blooming in the middle of the wilderness.

Behold the beyond! Behold the joy beyond expression that Christ promises you right now, and that you will experience in all of its fullness in eternity in heaven. Let us not squelch or hide that joy. Let us not mumble our praises, but lift our voices high. Let our words and our work sing of this joy in the presence of all we meet. Let us walk the holy way with gladness through the desert of this world, until we reach our destination—the eternal Mount Zion. Amen.