

The Kingdom Comes

Isaiah 35

December 12, 2010

Isaiah prophesied after the northern kingdom, Israel, fell to the Assyrian empire. This placed the southern kingdom, Judah, at greater risk, especially the capital, Jerusalem. In this context Isaiah called on the nation of Judah to not make the same mistakes Israel had, or they would face the same fate at the hands of the Babylonians. It was a dark message that looked into the future and reported back the things there as if they already were. Because the people would not repent and turn back to God, their future was set.

Our text comes from the midst of this message. It is one of many bright spots in the otherwise sad word from God the prophets had to bring. Isaiah looks past the coming destruction and pain for God's people to a time afterward. He describes what the end will be like when God's kingdom comes to the earth in all its fullness.

The coming kingdom brings **joy**. After God pours out His wrath on the nations the world is sort of reset. The wild animals will have their places to live. It will be a time of peace. In that time God's provision will be made known. The earth will be glad for it. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. Isaiah said, "*It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.*" (v.2) Glory and splendor will be given to them. They will exhibit the glory of the LORD and the splendor of God.

That is not the end, however. It is only the beginning. The rejoicing and blooming of the

wilderness brings with it **hope**. As they see the Lord's splendor and glory His people are strengthened to seek His face. Look at the commands Isaiah gives in response to God's glory being revealed. "*Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.'*" (vv.3-4) God's people are to be strengthened by the promise of His coming. As the world rejoices and the parched land is glad, feeble hands and weak knees give way to strength and firm footing.

We are told to set aside our fear of the future. As with Moses and Joshua the command comes to be strong and filled with courage instead of fear. In the past this was because the Lord was going with them. Now it is because He is coming back!

Notice what Isaiah said He brings with Him, however. We are not accustomed to finding joy, peace, and strength in vengeance and divine retribution. God's judgement is more often given as a reason for feeble hands and knees that give way. Isaiah's point is that this coming will not be for punishment. That will have already taken place and God's wrath will have already been poured out. This coming is to bring restoration and redemption to God's people. As Isaiah said in his description of it, "*[He] will come to save you.*"

This salvation is the point. The fulfillment of the salvation of those who belong to God is the point to which all of history is pointing. It is the point to which we are headed. The way to salvation has been shown. The way in which it is provided has been made. God's

salvation, His redemption of His people has been accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus, His anointed. It is that death and resurrection that serve as the focal point for human history. It is to that event that the prophets looked forward with hope and we look back with gratitude and thankfulness. It is to God's forgiveness as made available in that event that all of His people have looked with repentance and awe. When God comes, He comes to **save** His people.

This gives us joy in the present, and like the prophets of old, it gives us hope for the future. Salvation has been provided, but its effects are not all complete. We live in the presence of God now, the Holy Spirit indwelling the hearts of all who belong to Christ, but the fullness of that salvation is incomplete. We still live with the effects of sin. We are still in the world and under the influence of temptations to do things our own way and to trust our own strength rather than God.

With salvation comes other signs of God's presence. Look at the other things Isaiah said would accompany the glory and splendor of God. "*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.*" (vv.5,6) God brings salvation from our sins and a right relationship with Him. That is first and foremost, but He also brings healing. He was known by Abraham as Yahweh Yireh—the God who provides. He provides for all of the needs of His people. There is nothing in their lives that escapes His notice or is outside His love. He does not always do what they want. He does what is best for them. Whenever He is present, however, the physical

world will be effected, just as our hearts and spiritual lives are.

This is so true, and was to be such a mark of the breaking of God's kingdom into the world, that Jesus made use of it. Jesus went around teaching and building the kingdom of God in the hearts of all who would listen to Him. He did not make a big deal of the fact He is the Messiah—He didn't mention it. He also didn't deny it.

Matthew and Luke both recount an incident that took place after John the Baptist was put in jail. Hearing the reports coming in from outside the prison walls, John sent some of his followers to seek out Jesus. This man who had proclaimed Jesus to be, "*The lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" at Jesus' baptism seems to have been slipping in his certainty. He sent his followers to ask Jesus if He really were the one, or if they needed to look for someone else. John may have wanted to ensure that he had met the Messiah before he was executed. Jesus' response to John is telling. In his typical fashion He did not simply tell them He is the one and they can go tell John to relax. Instead, Jesus pointed to the evidence, and the evidence to which He pointed was the signs Isaiah mentioned in our text. Look with me at Jesus' response as recorded by Matthew. "*Go back and 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 good news is preached to the poor.*" (Matthew 11:4,5)

It's not just God's people that are changed by the breaking forth of His kingdom into the world, though it begins with them. It is not just from our sin that He

saves us, though that begins there. The effects of God's kingdom in the world are felt worldwide, and His salvation heals more than our broken spirits, but includes our broken bodies and many of the other effects of sin as well. This is why Paul could say that all creation waits in eager anticipation for the completing of what God began with the cross and the empty tomb.

Another mark of the kingdom of God is that it comes with a **highway**. We were reminded Wednesday evening of the importance of highways, both in Isaiah, and in the world. This is a special sort of road to which Isaiah looks, however. He gives this highway a name: the Way of Holiness. This is the pathway to God. It is the road that takes us ever deeper into His realm. It begins with His kingdom, as all who set foot on it are His. It is maintained by Him, and all those who travel it are kept in His mighty arms. In order to take this road we must first be washed clean and made righteous.

The **cross** is the foundation for this road. We can only approach the highway by kneeling before it and the One who hung on it. We must be washed clean by the shed blood of Jesus Christ if we are to journey on the path that leads to God's presence. Those whose still bear the stain of their sin have no place on the road and will not gain entrance to it. It is for those who walk in God's way. The wicked will not go about on it.

The result is that it is a safe road. As we were also reminded Wednesday evening, safe roads have historically been rare things. Through most of human history roads have been the haunts of robbers and thieves. In the wilderness between cities roads also went through wild and untamed territories. In the Middle East

lions and bears were not uncommon, and an unwary and unprepared traveler could become lunch. Yet this road would be safe. The danger and death that sin brought into the world would be absent from it. Sinners and ferocious beasts would be absent from this path. Only the redeemed will walk there.

This is an important distinction. I pointed to it a few moments ago, but now we need to dwell on it a little bit. It is only the **redeemed** that will be on the road. Nothing that carries the taint of sin will be allowed on it. It is for God's people who have been made holy and righteous, and not for any other.

The other point that bears notice here is that "the redeemed" is in the passive tense. People, like things, do not redeem themselves. If a person is redeemed it is because **God** has chosen to redeem them. It is an act of God on behalf of His people. The prophets understood that God had redeemed the Israelites when He brought them out of Egypt. From the very beginning, redemption of sinners has been God's work, and His alone. We can do nothing to purchase ourselves from sin and its power. Only God can do that, and He has done it through the cross for all who are His. Nobody has ever paid his or her own ransom from sin. It is the ransomed of the Lord, and them alone, that will walk this road and return to the God who made them and purchased them for Himself.

And so the ransomed of the Lord will return. Look with me at the rest of verse ten. It is the passage from which we get the praise chorus, Therefore the Redeemed." *"They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee*

away.” It is with this image that Isaiah left his teaching on the future here. He had told of God’s coming wrath. He had warned them of the destruction to come and the pain their sin would bring upon them. He had also told them that God would not abandon them and a way would be provided for them to return to Him. Now, as Isaiah got ready to return to the history of his people and point out how his prophecies were beginning to be fulfilled, he left this section with a wonderful image of the results of God’s ransoming of His people and setting them on the highway in the wilderness.

When the ransomed of the Lord return, they will enter God’s holy city with **singing**. Songs of joy and praise will be on their lips—joy because they have made it to the safety of God’s direct and personal protection and presence, and praise because it is God who brought them there. They will be singing because they are finally entering into the future for which they had so longed and to which God had redeemed them. It will be a time of celebration.

Instead of bandits and wild animals, it will be gladness and joy that overtake them. They will be hunted and caught by delight at coming to the end of God’s redemption story and entering into His glory. Gladness and joy will replace the sorrow that was theirs. Singing will take the place of sighing. Indeed, sorrow and sighing will have no place in their new lives as they come to God’s city and the place He has prepared for them.

Oh, that the world around us would give up its vain search for gladness and joy and lay hold of the God who can redeem them from their sin and set their feet on

the only true path to the happiness they seek! This is the goal of the kingdom God is breaking forth. This is the purpose of Jesus’ life on earth: to be the way, to set before us **Himself** as the highway to eternal joy and gladness. And so, this is the reason he allowed Himself to be born in that stable and laid in a feeding trough those many years ago. It is the message of Christmas and why Jesus’ birth is good news to all people.

Get ready to meet Him. He is coming soon. As we celebrate His coming the first time and all the blessing that He brought us, as we celebrate the breaking forth of God into our world as a baby—God with us, be aware that what He came to bring was only a taste, only a hint, of the joy and splendor that await those who belong to Him.