

Oasis in the Desert

People of God, the nations who refuse to put their trust in the LORD, God will turn them into a spiritual desert and wasteland. But he also promises that his people who do not put their trust in princes and in man, and who instead place their trust in God, they will be like garden sanctuary in the midst of the desert wilderness.

This is of great comfort to us today as we consider the state of the nations around us. As God pours out his judgment and wrath on those who reject His sovereignty and Lordship, God promises to continue to bless His people and make them into a spiritual Garden in the midst of the desert. And it is precisely because of God's promise to bless us that we can continue to be strong in our faith, and not fear, but rejoice with joy and gladness and singing.

Be Strong, and Fear Not is the only exhortation in the whole of chapter 35. Everything else in the chp. is simply an explanation of the great salvation that God is to accomplish for us. And so, in light of our salvation, Isaiah encourages the people to be strong, and fear not.

Now what reason would God's people have to fear to begin with? In the context of Isaiah, the prophet is predicting the coming wrath of the great nations like Assyria and Babylon, but also smaller but no less ruthless nations like Edom. Faithful Israelites lived among hostile nations around them, as well as within a hostile nation that had rejected their God and embraced idolatry. And so God's wrath is being poured out upon all those nations, even Israel and Judah, who refuse to put their trust in YHWH.

That is what chapters 13-35 of Isaiah are all about: Those chapters teach this: YHWH is the Lord of the Nations and their fate is in His hands (13-

23); He is the sovereign actor on the stage of history, not them (24-27); making alliances with, and trusting stronger nations to fight the battles for you is putting our faith in kings and princes instead of the YHWH the True King. This is self defeating (28-33); the ultimate results are : if you trust the nations, if you put your faith in princes, and refuse to call out to God to save you, then you will inherit a spiritual desert wasteland; but if you trust YHWH, and fear Him alone, you inherit a spiritual Garden (34-35). This same point was made in the first verse of our Psalm today, in Psalm 146 – *Put no confidence in princes, Nor for help on man depend; He shall die to dust returning, and his purposes shall end.*

And it is precisely this truth that chapters 34-35 illustrate for us in a striking contrast between a productive and fertile land that gets turned into a desert (ch. 34) and a howling desert wasteland that gets turned into a lush Garden (ch. 35).

Let's examine some of the language in chapter 34 so we can see the contrast more clearly. "Yahweh is enraged against all the nations" (34:2). He has given them over as a sacrifice and slaughter (34:2), the stench of their corpses will rise, the mountains will flow with blood (34:3). "Yahweh's sword is sated with blood" and He will effect "a great slaughter in the land of Edom" (34:6) it is "a day of vengeance" and it is a year of recompense for the cause of Zion (34:8). Edom's "streams will be turned into pitch, its soil is turned into sulfur" (34:9). "It will lie waste" and "no one shall pass through it" (34:10). "The hawk and the porcupine will possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it" (34:11). "Thorns will come up in its palaces, ...and it will be a habitation of jackals, ... ostriches, ...wild animals, ...wolves, ...and wild goats" (34:13-14). It becomes a place for owl to make nests, and hawks gather there to find a mate (34:15). This is the Lord's judgment on a sinful nation. There are no

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longer any nobles, there is no one there to even call it a kingdom, all its princes are brought to nothing (34:12). This is the inheritance of the nation that puts its trust in princes and men, and does not trust in the Lord. It is their possession forever, from generation to generation this is their dwelling place and destiny (34:17).

This is destiny of all those, individuals and nations, who reject the Sovereignty and Lordship of Christ the King over them.

But in chapter 35, the prophet envisions a land filled with rejoicing and joy and singing, where “the desert will rejoice and blossom like a crocus” (35:1)— people “shall see Yahweh’s glory” (35:2)— the Lord “will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God He will come to “save you”— the blind will see and the deaf will hear and the lame will “leap like a deer” and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. (35:5-6)— “waters will break out in the wilderness, streams in the desert” (35:6); the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. Even the haunt of jackals shall be filled with reeds and rushes (35:7; note the contrast with 34:9, 13). “A highway of Holiness will be there, and the unclean will not pass through it. Not even the foolish will stumble upon it. ” (35:8; note the contrast with 34:10). “No lion will be there, nor will any ravenous beast go up on it” (35:9; note the contrast with 34:11-14). “Yahweh’s ransomed ones will return on that way, and come to Zion with singing” Everlasting joy is on their heads, they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (35:10). This is the spiritual inheritance of those who place their trust in Christ as Lord, both individuals, and nations.

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This glorious garden imagery is a picture of the spiritual reality that Jesus Christ accomplished for us. First off, consider all of the allusions to the miracles that Christ performs.

The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and ears of the deaf unstopped, and the lame leap like a deer. Jesus did all these, and in fact, the Lord even references this verse in Isa 35 to the disciples of John the Baptist when they came to Jesus in Matt 11 asking Jesus if he really was the Messiah or should they be looking for another. And Jesus says, *Go and tell John what you see: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them.*

In Acts 3:8 Apostles heal a lame man, and there it specifically says he began to walk and leap and praise God. This is a fulfillment of Isa 35:6 – *then the lame man shall leap like a deer.* And in our Gospel reading today in Mark 7 Jesus heals a man who is deaf and mute and he proclaims the praise of the Lord, which is in fulfillment of the second line of verse 6 – *and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.*

Waters breaking forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert – Jesus taught in John 7:38 that out of peoples inner being there will flow rivers of living water, and this he spoke about the Spirit. But also when Jesus was on the cross becoming a curse for us, becoming a spiritual desert, as it were, exiled in the wilderness on the cross – water and blood flowed from his side when he was pierced with the spear.

Concerning the Highway of Holiness; Jesus is called the Holy one of God, and Jesus is the Way. And so Jesus is the Way of Holiness. And all who travel on that way, are those who believe and obey Jesus.

The promise that there would be no ravenous beasts on that way is fulfilled in the peace that the Spirit brings about in the church among the

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different peoples. And so the Apostle Paul in Gal. 5:15 urges the Christians not to bite and devour one another. Animals are often representative of people. And so no ravenous beasts on the way refers to the peace within the Church.

V. 10 says: *the Ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.* While initially it may have had a temporal fulfillment in the return from Exile in Babylon, the Gospels indicate the true spiritual return from Exile began at the ministry of John the Baptist and continues in the ministry of our Lord. Zion was the name of the Mountain that the Temple in Jerusalem sat on. But this is just a type of the true Mountain Temple of the Lord in Heaven, which is actually the Church in union with Christ who is in Heaven. The Apostle Paul tells us in Hebrews 12 – *“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem, and to the innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speak a better word than the blood of Abel.”*

This is all very important theological understanding. We have now, by faith, everything the prophets of old looked forward to. All these prophecies are reckoned by some interpreters as prophecies about the Future Millennial Kingdom, what is going to be true in the 1,000 year reign of Christ. But People of God, this is already true now. We are in the Millennium now. The time between the two Advents of Christ is the most exciting time in History, according to the Prophets. The Whole Bible was written for our benefit, written for our instruction, upon whom

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the telos of the ages, the fullness of the ages has come. That is us in Christ.

And now, People of God, since we are a people who have all these spiritual blessings in Christ, since Christ has regenerated our hearts, and we live during the time of the regeneration, the time of reformation, the time when God is restoring all things – to use a handful of phrases from the NT – how then ought we to walk? Should we be afraid? Should we look to the hostile nations that surround us and be filled with anxiety and stress about the future? Should we be paralyzed by fear?

No. We look walk by faith in the word of God and its promises, and not by sight in what the nations are doing, and we realize that we have the greatest spiritual blessing in Christ, and we rejoice. We walk in the way of Christ on toward the heavenly Mt Zion with singing and everlasting joy and gladness on heads, praising the name of our God, for He reigns. The nations are nothing to God. *They are a drop in the bucket. They are as dust on the scales. He brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness* (Isa. 40:15, 17). Our God and King and Prince and Savior Jesus Christ is sovereign over all things. And He is ruling over all things, all peoples, and is in control of all the events of earth, and is actively working together all things for your good and salvation – so what do you have to fear?

A people who live in the confidence of the Sovereignty of God on their behalf, must be a people who rejoice with singing, and are filled with everlasting joy and gladness, and that means that he makes us to be an oasis of joy in a desert a desert of despair.

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Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be Strong, fear not!" Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you. Isaiah 35:3-4

People of God, when we walk by sight and not by faith in times like our own, all we will see is things falling apart. But people of God, do you think the Lord is not equipped to handle the situations of our time? God has handled all the calamities of the world from the very beginning, all the high rebellions of man, all the evil plots of Satan, even including the murder of His own Son. And do you think that now, in 2021, God all of a sudden forgot how to govern the world and bring His people and His kingdom to the next stage of glory?

Even we walk by sight and not by faith, that is when our hands can grow weak, and our knees can get feeble and our hearts can get anxious. Times of crisis are times of testing where God is seeing if we will walk by faith and not by sight. When we walk by sight, we don't see the Lord Jesus today, instead we see the news reports about the Orwellian lockdowns going on around the world. When we walk by sight, we don't see Christ who is sitting at the right hand of God ruling over all things, but we see the news reports of the coming mandatory vaccines passports and social credit system. When we walk by sight, we don't hear God laughing in the Heavens at man's rebellion, instead we hear the cackles of the enemy as they plot to take control over every aspect of life.

So, we see all these things, with our eyes, but if we don't see them with eyes of faith, then it can become very easy for us to get discouraged and to stop working, stop praying, stop singing and rejoicing. Because it might seem that we are just rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. The massive juggernaut of the State getting ready to roll over us and make us conform to all manners of tyranny. And so we get weak in the knees and our

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convictions fail. We think about how we are going to get food in the future, and we imagine dystopian nightmares, and so our hearts are filled with anxiety and stress. We are told to be fearful of every new strain of the virus and be afraid to live because you should be afraid to die.

But people of God, right now is the time when we need to see what God has done for us in Christ. He has made us the Church, members of His Body, we are a Kingdom of Priests who continually march further up and further in toward the Heavenly Mount Zion with songs of joy and gladness on our lips. We are a Garden Oasis in the mist of the desert of fear and anxiety and weakness. We are a sanctuary of hope and rest during these times.

God is pouring out His wrath upon the world around us and turning a once lush Garden into howling waste of a wilderness because the nations keep rejecting God and keep putting more and more trust in the state. But those who place their trust in Christ the King, he is making us into a glorious oasis, and he is coming to save us.

As the world is filled with such gloom and despair, the main source of our strength and life and vitality, is found in our joy and gladness in God, which is expressed in songs of praise. This is why we spend so much time singing, and build a culture of song. We need to sing the songs of Zion and we need to praise our God through all these evil days. This will help us to be more hopeful and joyful.

And finally, we need to really believe what the rest of v. 4 says in Isa 35, as to why we should be strong and fear not!

Behold, you God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God He will come and save you!

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Yes, Come Lord Jesus. Maranatha! The Lord will come, the Lord is coming to bring days of vengeance on his enemies, He is coming to bring a year of recompense for Zion, the city of God. Jesus will come at the end, and right every wrong, and punish every sin, and destroy every last one of His enemies. Just read Psalm 37 – right Jacob?

But we need to believe people of God that that process is happening now, even when we don't see it. God is shaking the earth and the heavens, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. The things that cannot be shaken, these are heavenly things built upon the firm foundation of the word of God, these are eternal and will remain. Everything else God is removing in His good time.

When God comes to save His people and bring great reformation and revival, it always begins by the world falling apart and people going crazy and the old way being broken down before the eyes of God's people.

I believe we are on the Eve of another Great Reformation or Revival where God is sanctifying His people and getting us ready to follow him more closely. The Lord is moving history and we are experiencing one of those many crisis times that happens over and over again throughout history.

But again, what all that means for us, People of God, is that Jesus is putting all his enemies under his feet. He is destroying his enemies and giving them what they deserve. He is sanctifying His Church. He is purging us and exposing those who are false and not loyal to Him This is what we are seeing before our eyes today. Christ is getting ready to save us, he is getting ready to judge the wicked.

So let us abandon any half measures, and go full in for the Lord. His word and spirit and sacraments keep us refreshed and grant us life, so that

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we can be a life giving oasis in the desert. Our earthly nation might be brought to nothing, but it is at times like this especially that we need to remember that *our citizenship is in Heaven, from Mount Zion, and from there we await a Savior, the Lord Jesu Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his Glorious Body, by the power that enables him to subject all things to Himself.* This truth in Philippians spurs Paul on to then tell the Philippians to Rejoice!

And so, rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone, the Lord is at hand. – The word “reasonable” there is difficult to translate into English, and I suppose the best way we could understand it in our context would be to say, live in such a way that you put all your trust in God to save you, and not be stressed out by the world falling about around you. Be confident in the Lord to save, and not in the enemy to destroy. The Lord is at hand. Therefore, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your heart and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

When we focus on all that is good, true, and beautiful and excellent, and have total faith that God will save us, even in death, and that His kingdom cannot ever be destroyed, that God is working all things together for our salvation, then no matter what comes to pass, we can be like a Garden Oasis in the midst of a desert. Amen.

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