

Isaiah 35: Restored, Revived and Redeemed

Introduction

As many of you will know, in a former life I was a Maths teacher. So it won't come as a surprise to you that I enjoy numbers. And I enjoyed it when someone pointed out to me that the numbers in the book of Isaiah reflect the numbers in the Bible as a whole. Isaiah is divided into two distinct sections, with 39 chapters in the first section, and 27 in the second – 66 chapters in all. And, as I'm sure you know, the Bible is divided into two Testaments. Did you know that there are 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New: 66 books in all.

Now I don't think we can read too much into this – it's perhaps just a coincidence – but facts like that make me love the Bible even more.

The great theme of Isaiah is salvation. In fact, the name Isaiah means *The Lord is salvation*. And yet, there are huge chunks of Isaiah which announce God's judgement on sinful people. If you glance back in your bibles at the headings in the earlier chapters, you'll see what I mean. Judgement on Jerusalem and Judah. The Lord's anger against Israel. And so it goes on: God's judgement on Assyria. Prophecies against Babylon, against Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Edom, Tyre. Then there's an awesome heading to chapter 24: The Lord's devastation of the earth.

Yet scattered among all this doom and gloom, shafts of light shine. The Lord's love for his people is from everlasting to everlasting. He doesn't want anyone to come under his judgement, so Chapters 12 and 25 are glorious songs of praise. And, of course, at Christmas, we often read from Isaiah: *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:14). *And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* (Isaiah 9:6). Then, later in the book, in chapter 53, Isaiah prophesies that the Lord Jesus, as the suffering servant of God, will take on his body the punishment that we all, like lost sheep, deserve.

So, in a very real sense, the book of Isaiah reflects the *message* of the Bible, not just the number of chapters and books. For the Bible tells us that as sinful human beings, we come under God's fearful judgement; and yet he has given us his Son to take that judgement upon himself on the cross, allowing us to go free.

Well, that was a long introduction, wasn't it? We're going to look at one of those chapters where God's light shines – a chapter which promises Christians a glorious future.

So, let's look at the first couple of verses of Isaiah 35.

¹The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, ²it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God.

Our first heading:

Creation Restored

In Genesis chapter 3, we read that when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, the whole creation came under God's curse. To the snake, God said, *"Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals..."* (Genesis 3:14). To the woman, he said, *"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe..."* (Genesis 3:15). And to the man he said, *"...Cursed is the ground because of you..."* (Genesis 3:17) Because of Adam and Eve's sin – and ours – all of God's perfect creation has been spoiled. Paul talks about this in Romans chapter 8. He uses the analogy of childbirth. *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time* (Romans 8:22).

We don't have to look very far to see that this is true. In many places around the world, men, women and children are suffering through famine, through persecution and war. And many millions have been forced to abandon their own homes through unbearable trouble. In our own lives, perhaps we're suffering from bereavement, ill health, family breakdown or financial worries. And it's natural for us to ask: where's God in all of this?

All now may seem hopeless. But be encouraged. The Lord Jesus taught us to pray: *Your Kingdom come*. And he would never teach us to pray for something that's impossible. So, let's take hold of God's promise that one day, creation will be restored. God gave John a wonderful glimpse of this new creation. *Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* (Revelation 21:1 – 5)

Isaiah says that *"the desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom."* And in verse 2, this new, restored creation will see the *glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God*. So let's continue to pray *Your kingdom come, your will be done*, and look forward to the day when creation is restored.

Let's read on:

³*Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴say 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."*

Our next heading:

Christians Revived

When creation is restored, Christians will be revived. Feeble hands will be strengthened, knees that give way will be steadied, fearful hearts will be encouraged because God will come to save. With our hands, we do the *work* of God. On our knees we offer *worship* to God. With our hearts, we submit to the *will* of God. Hands, knees and hearts will be revived.

He will come to save you, says the prophet. Well, he has come to save us – in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. By his death on the cross, he offers forgiveness to all who put their trust in him. By the power of his resurrection he promises us eternal life with him. And the Bible promises that he will come again to usher in this new creation. Someone once counted over 300 references in the New Testament to the second coming of Jesus. Let's read on for verse 5 says that when Jesus comes again:

⁵*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*

Well, I know that Jesus has come to save me, but with each year that passes, my eyes become weaker and my ears become deafer. So I look forward to that day when I shall be able to see and hear clearly once more.

Read on, verse 6:

⁶*Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.*

As I read verse 6 – the wonderful picture of the lame leaping like a deer – I'm reminded of the story in Acts chapter 3 of the lame beggar outside the Beautiful Gate in Jerusalem. He thought that Peter and John were going to give him some money. They said they didn't have any to give, but to the man's amazement, they gave him something far greater: Peter said *"In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. (Acts 3:6)* The lame man jumped to his feet and went with them into the temple, *...walking and leaping and praising God. (Acts 3:8)*

If you're a Christian here this morning, then all these promises apply to you. Hands, knees, hearts, eyes and ears – your whole body – will be made new in the new heaven and the new earth. Maybe you're young and fit, and this doesn't seem such a big deal. But believe me, for those of us who've been

round the block a few times, who maybe find it hard to get up out of a chair or walk in a straight line, these are wonderful promises!

Let's read on.

⁸*And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. ⁹No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.*

Our next heading:

The Celestial Road

In your Bibles, you'll see that the word *Way* is spelt with a capital W. So, this is no ordinary road: this is the road of holiness that we as Christians must follow if we're going to be obedient to Jesus. In fact, early Christians were called *Followers of The Way*. (You'll find this in Acts chapters 9 and 19.)

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan describes Christian's journey along the road to the Celestial City. On the way, he is joined by a man called Hopeful. Christian and Hopeful meet a lad named Ignorance, who believes that he'll be allowed into the Celestial City through his own good deeds rather than as a gift of God's grace. They try to persuade him to journey to the Celestial City with them. But Ignorance persists in doing it his own way, and, sadly, ends up being cast into hell.

If this seems harsh, listen to the words of Jesus. More than anyone else, he showed us the love of the father. But he also warned us of fearful judgment if we follow the wrong way: *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* (Matthew 7:13, 14)

How do we find that small gate, that narrow road? The astonishing claim of Jesus is this. He said: *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. (John 10:9)*. A claim he repeats a little later: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)* What an amazing thing to say. If this were not true, then surely it would be an evil blasphemy, to give people false hope, leading them down the wrong path. Let me urge you, then: if you haven't yet made up your mind about Jesus, then do so now, before it's too late.

Verse 9 again:

⁹*No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰and those the Lord has rescued will return. 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,*

Our final heading:

Crowns for the Redeemed

My dictionary says that to redeem something is to recover possession or ownership of it by payment of a price or service; to redeem is to set free, to rescue or ransom.

Around the time of Jesus, a wealthy Roman would buy a slave at the marketplace. Once bought, a person would be a slave for life. They'd only get their freedom if they were given it by owner, or if they were able, somehow, to buy their freedom. But to do that, they'd have to raise the same sum of money that the master paid – and, of course, this would be virtually impossible.

The Bible says that in our natural, fallen state we are *all* slaves – slaves to sin: ***Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." John 8:34***

Let me show you what I mean. A little while ago, I read a book called 'How not to grow up'. It was the autobiography of comedian and writer Richard Herring. He'd had a moderately successful career as a stand-up comic, and as a script writer for several TV shows. As he approached his 40th birthday, he took stock of his life. He felt he'd achieved nothing: he'd had a series of failed relationships. After his stand-up act, he would get drunk night after night, trying to pick up a girl; followed by brief and meaningless sexual encounter. Shortly after his 40th birthday, having finished a tiring stand-up comedy tour, he took a holiday in Thailand for rest and recuperation. He says he was determined to leave his old ways behind. But within days of returning home, each evening would find him once more in a bar, chatting up women. What a sad story. This is what it means to be a slave to sin.

Maybe you and I don't think it applies to us? But even Paul struggled with sin: ***"...but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." Romans 7:14***. But the good news is that Jesus has redeemed us from slavery, for Paul also writes: ***At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. ... But he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:3, 5)*** On the cross, Jesus paid the price to redeem us, to buy us back from slavery to sin.

We are redeemed. Hallelujah!

Isaiah says that the redeemed will wear crowns of joy. What does joy really mean? What's the difference between joy and pleasure? Here are some of the ways in which joy and pleasure are different:

- Heavenly joy makes us *better people*; earthly pleasure often makes us worse.
- Heavenly joy leads us deeper into God's presence; the pursuit of earthly pleasure can lead us away from God.

- Joy is inward; pleasure is external.
- Joy satisfies; earthly pleasure always falls short. As he approached 40th birthday – which, incidentally, he calls middle age – Richard Herring looked back, and realised his life amounted to nothing. His continual seeking after pleasure never brought real satisfaction.
- Joy never wearies. Pleasure, when in excess, causes loathing. You may have a sweet tooth and love chocolate, but too much makes you sick. You can never have too much heavenly joy.
- Joy is everlasting. Earthly pleasures may be sweet, but they are quickly gone. Our last verse tells us: *Everlasting joy will crown their heads.*

You might not be feeling joyful right now. You may be suffering in some way. The bible never talks about joy in suffering, but it does talk about joy *through* suffering. Was Jesus full of joy on the cross? I doubt it very much. But the Bible does say ***For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)***

Jesus never promises us an easy life as we walk the Celestial Road. He tells us that if we want to be his disciples, we must take up our cross each day and follow him. And James says that to win the crown of joy, we shall need to persevere: ***Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. (James 1:12)***

First comes endurance, then a crown of life, a crown of joy.

So I pray that God will give us all faith that will endure to the end; that we shall all see that great and glorious Day when creation is restored. What a privilege it is to serve the master who has redeemed us – who has set us free – through the death of his Son. I pray that we may all follow the Celestial Road that leads to heaven and that God will crown us, his revived and redeemed people, with everlasting joy.

Amen