

What would you say has been the happiest moment of your life? Maybe it was your wedding day. Or maybe it was when your children were born. Or maybe your children did something that made you proud. Maybe that was your happiest moment. Well, all of those things are just faint pictures of the joy that we will feel in heaven. Our reading for today from the prophet Isaiah emphasizes joy and rejoicing. It says, **“The desert and parched land will be glad” (Isaiah 35:1). “It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy” (35:2) “The mute tongue will shout for joy” (35:6). “Gladness and joy will overtake them” (35:10).** And so the theme of our sermon today is

Jesus Comes to Bring Us Joy

- I. By transforming our desert
- II. By showing us the way to Zion.

First, Jesus comes to bring us joy by transforming our desert. In the previous chapter of Isaiah, the chapter just before our lesson for today, Isaiah talked about the luxuriant land of Edom and he said that the luxuriant land of Edom would become a wasteland. He said, **“Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch ... her land will become blazing pitch. ... The desert owl and the screech owl will possess it. ... God will stretch out over Edom the plumb line of desolation.” (Isaiah 34:9, 11)** This is a picture of the fact that sin has destructive consequences. Sometimes we can see the harm that our sin has done in our own lives and in the lives of others. Other times we experience hardship simply as the result of living in a fallen world. But the good news of our passage today is that God is able to take what sin has ruined and completely transform it.

In Isaiah 34, a luxuriant land is turned into a wasteland. In Isaiah 35, the opposite happens: the desert is transformed into a well-watered garden.¹ Notice the complete transformation that takes place in our passage. **“The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom” (Isaiah 35:1-2).** Isaiah pictures the desert blooming with lovely flowers. **“The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon” (Isaiah 35:2).** Lebanon and Carmel and Sharon were places that were known for their tall trees and fertile soil. Isaiah pictures the desert turning into a lush forest. He also says **“Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool” (Isaiah 35:6).** In the summer time, do you ever go to the beach and you step on the sand with your bare feet and you say, “Ouch! That’s hot!” Isaiah pictures the burning sand turning into a nice cool pool. A complete transformation. And we might think, how could this ever happen in the desert? And the answer is that God is able to transform any desert into a beautiful garden.

He is able to transform the desert of guilt. It says, **“They will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God” (35:2).** One time Moses said to God, “Lord, show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18). And God responded by talking to Moses about who he is. He passed in front of Moses and said, **“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7).** God transforms the desert of our guilt with the glory of his loving forgiveness.

God also transforms the desert of fear. It says, **“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way” (Isaiah 35:3).** Have you ever been so nervous that your knees shake? God has words of comfort for us when we are scared. It says, **“Say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear.’” (Isaiah 35:4)** God said similar words to Joshua, **“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD**

¹ I owe this insight to John Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 620); Edward Young, NICOT.

your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:8).² We don’t have to be afraid of anything because God is with us. That transforms our fear into courage.

It transforms our fear into courage even in the face of opposition. In many places in the world God’s people are opposed and persecuted. In some places in the world, God’s people are even threatened with physical violence. But either in this life or on the last, God is going to come and rescue his people. It says, **“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you” (Isaiah 35:4).** In Advent we talk about God coming. And here God promises that he will come to save us from all of our enemies. He will save us from sin and death and the power of the devil. He will do that finally and completely when Jesus returns on the Last Day.

Isaiah goes on to talk more about the complete transformation that God will bring about. He says, **“Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer” (Isaiah 35:5).** Jesus referred to this passage when he sent word to John about the miracles he was performing. Jesus said, **“The blind receive sight, the lame walk ... the deaf hear” (Matt 11:4).** These miracles confirmed for John and for us that Jesus is the promised Savior. And these miracles were also previews of the complete transformation that God will bring about on the Last Day. The Bible says that Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. When Jesus comes back a believer who was lame in this life will leap like a deer. When Jesus comes back a believer who has lost their eyesight or their hearing will have those things completely restored. God is going to bring about a complete transformation and that will give us eternal joy.

Jesus comes to bring us joy by transforming our desert of guilt, by transforming our desert of fear. And some day he will give us complete transformation and this gives us eternal joy. Jesus comes to bring us joy by transforming our desert. And, secondly, Jesus comes to bring us joy showing us the Way to Zion.

Isaiah says, **“And a highway will be there, it will be called the Way of Holiness” (35:8).** This highway leads to Zion. It says in verse 10, **“They will enter Zion with singing” (35:10).** Zion is another name for the city of Jerusalem. But often in the Bible it is also a picture of heaven. The highway that Isaiah is talking about is the Way to heaven.

It says that **“the unclean will not journey on it” (35:8).** But if the unclean cannot journey on it, how can you and I journey on it? We are unclean because of our sins. Even Isaiah said in chapter 6, **“Woe to me! For I am a man of unclean lips” (6:5).** If Isaiah is unclean, then surely we are too! How can we who are unclean journey on this way to heaven? Isaiah gives us the answer. He says, **“But only the redeemed will walk there” (35:9).** To redeem means to pay a price to set someone free. Isaiah talked about the price that Jesus paid so that we could walk on this Way to heaven. In chapter 53 Isaiah said, **“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).** Jesus paid that price to redeem us.

Martin Luther lectured on the book of Isaiah at roughly the same time as he was writing his Small Catechism. And when he was talking about this verse of Isaiah he said something very similar to what he said in the Small Catechism. He said about this passage in Isaiah: **“At great cost we are the redeemed of the Lord, not with gold and silver but with his precious blood.”**³

² I owe this insight to the commentator Edward Young, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

³ Luther’s Works, Volume 16, page 305. See footnote 7.

Through faith in Jesus we are holy. Jesus has washed us clean so that we can walk the Way of Holiness to heaven. In the book of Acts, Christians called themselves “followers of the Way.” And Jesus said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14) Jesus is the Way to heaven.

Someone once said that from start to finish the Bible is basically about this: Because of our sin, we can't find our way to God. But through Jesus God has graciously opened up the Way to him.⁴ Through faith in Jesus we will enter Zion with singing. It says, **“Everlasting joy will crown their heads” (35:10)**. Joy will be like a crown on our heads. **“Gladness and joy will overtake them” (35:10)**. This pictures joy as something that comes from outside of us and overtakes us and overwhelms us. On the other hand, sorrow and sighing will run away from us: **“And sorrow and sighing will flee away” (35:10)**. No matter what difficulties we go through in this life, we will have overwhelming joy when we enter Zion.

Think again of the happiest you have ever been in your life. It will be like that only better and it will last forever. Jesus comes to bring us joy. Whatever desert we are in, he is going to completely transform it. Jesus comes to bring us joy by transforming our desert and by showing us the Way to Zion. Amen.

⁴ Martin Franzmann, “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics.”