

# The Holy Way

## An Exegetical Study of Isaiah 35:1-10

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The traditional lectionary sets Isaiah 35:3-10 as the reading from the Old Testament for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Trinity which celebrates the return of Christ at the end of the world. Series A of the new Three-Year Lectionary has chosen it for the Third Sunday in Advent. The choice is apt, as Jesus alludes to this prophecy in Matthew 11:4-5 which is part of the Gospel of the day.

My interest in the text is threefold. First, it illustrates some of the chief characteristics of Hebrew poetry which scholars have elucidated rather well in recent years. We need to appreciate these poetic conventions, if we are to hear a poem like this as its contemporary audience would have heard it. Secondly, I believe that it speaks critically and constructively to our generation in its obsession with physical health and concern for the future of planet earth with its disrupted ecology. Thirdly, it encourages those believers who have become discouraged and disheartened about themselves and their church. It shows how the Lord God will yet turn what looks like a dry and barren wilderness into a marvelous oasis and a new Garden of Eden.

### A. THE CONTEXT, FORM, AND STRUCTURE OF ISAIAH 35

There are two ways of reading this poem from its context. In the first of these, chapter 35 is linked with Isaiah 34. These two chapters then form a self-contained section, in which the judgment of God on the nations, the host of heaven, and especially Edom in Isaiah 34 stands in stark contrast to the return of the redeemed Israelites to Zion in Isaiah 35. So the day of the Lord's vengeance on Edom (34:8) is also the day of Zion's deliverance (35:4). This connection is reinforced by the mention of the jackals' haunt in 34:13 and 35:7. The desert of 35:1 and 6 could perhaps be the wasteland of Edom mentioned in 34:10-15, through which the redeemed will pass on their return to Zion. Yet these links are tenuous. The two pieces are basically dissimilar, as Isaiah 35 forecasts the triumphal return of God's people to Zion rather than the vindication of Zion at the expense of her enemies.

The second way of reading this poem, which I shall adopt, takes it as the conclusion of the first, Assyrian section of Isaiah. It is then a resounding finale to the prophecies of Isaiah 1-35 about God's purposes for Zion. Not only does it conclude this section, but it introduces some of the basic themes subsequently developed in Isaiah 40-66, such as the return of God's people to Zion, the transformation of the natural world, universal praise, and the revelation of God's glorious presence in Zion. It anticipates the prophecies about 'heavenly' Jerusalem in Isaiah 65:17-66:24 which round off the second part of Isaiah.

This chapter is a particularly fine piece of Hebrew poetry. It is couched in the form of a prophetic proclamation of salvation which may originally have been modeled on the oracle given by a prophet or a priest in response to the lament of the nation on a Day of Fasting. The language and imagery is largely conventional, a mixture of the poetic traditions fostered in the worship at the temple and taught in the schools of wisdom. The particular combination of these, however, seems to be unique to Isaiah.

The poem is a carefully-crafted piece both in its thematic development and its literary structure. Like a good wisdom poem, it does not make immediate sense. The main theme of the poem, as announced by the first two verses, seems to be the paradisaical metamorphosis of the natural world, with the wilderness and the desert as the eye-witnesses to the revelation of God's glory. But then, as the poem progresses, it becomes apparent that the main theme of the poem is the transformation and homecoming of God's people. It is they who will see God's glory. The poem creates a sense of suspense by withholding the actual location for the revelation of God's glory until the last verse.

The poem falls into two distinct and yet parallel parts. The main divisions are marked off by the repetition of two key words which form a circular pattern of inclusion and conclusion. The first key word is 'sing' in 35:2, 6, 10. The second key word is 'glad' which begins the first and last lines of the poem in 35:1 and 10. Thus the poem begins and ends with gladness. Both parts of the poem in turn form three parallel verses so that 35:1-2 corresponds with 35:6<sup>b</sup>-7, 35:3-4 with 35:3-4, and 35:5-6<sup>a</sup> with 35:10.

Isaiah 35 then comes in two parts with the following structure and thematic development:

**1. The Transformation at God's Advent: 35:1-6<sup>c</sup>.**

- a. The desert's jubilation at the sight of God's glory (35:1-2).
- b. The promise of salvation for the paralysed (35:3-4).
- c. The healing of the disabled (35:5-6<sup>a</sup>).

**2. The Homecoming of God's People to Zion: 35:6<sup>b</sup>-10.**

- a. The provision of water to irrigate the desert (35:6<sup>b</sup>-7).
- b. The holy, processional way for the redeemed (8-9).
- c. The return to Zion of God's ransomed people (10).

## **B. THE INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 35**

**1a.** The first stanza of the poem foretells the miraculous transformation of some unnamed desert. The poem, however, surprises us as it fixes on an unexpected aspect of this transformation. It fixes on the sudden upsurge of gladness in the desert which makes it break out into cries of ecstasy and songs of rejoicing. At the same time, the desert blossoms like the crocus (or narcissus or daffodil) which suddenly carpets the earth with masses of flowers in spring. Yet no reason is given for this change of the desert into a garden. The change does not end there; the transformed desert receives the glory of Mount Lebanon, which was noted for its forests of cedar and cypress, and the splendour of Mount Carmel, which towered over the plain of Sharon on the Mediterranean coast and was famous for its fruitful orchards. In fact, the name Carmel means an orchard. The desert then is transformed into a fertile mountain region with forests of timber and orchards of fruit trees. It is the place where the Lord, the God of Israel, reveals his glory, and it beholds his glory as it is revealed.

That then is the apparent sense of this stanza. Yet this interpretation does not satisfy the discerning reader, as one thing at least has been left unexplained. The puzzling feature is the masculine plural 'they' in 35:2 which lacks a clear antecedent. This pronouncement cannot refer to the wilderness, dry land, and desert, as they are all synonymous and are spoken of as 'it' in the previous line. So we are not yet told who will see God's glory.

We can go further than that, for the ruined city of Jerusalem is described in 27:10 and 32:14-16 as a wilderness (see 51:3). What's more, an earlier prophecy foretold in 32:15-16 how the wilderness would be transformed into an orchard and a forest by the gift of God's Spirit and the rule of a righteous king (see 29:17). It seems to me that the prophet makes use of certain stock images here which were familiar to his audience from their education in wisdom (see 1 Kgs. 4:32-33). Lebanon was the 'king' of the mountains in Canaan. On it grew the cedar which was the 'king' of the trees. Rulers and kings were therefore likened to the cedars of Lebanon (Isa. 2:13; 14:8; Ezek. 31:3-9; Hab. 2:17). So too were the Hebrew kings (Isa. 10:34; Ezek 17:3). Their Lebanon was Mount Zion (Jer. 22:6-7, 23; Zech. 11:1-2, cf. Isa. 29:17). Under their righteous rule, its mountains flourished like Lebanon itself (Ps. 72:16). If that is so, then the prophet promises the transformation of Zion. It would once again be the place for festive celebration and worship. It would again become the royal city of God, his capital city on earth. In it the heavenly King would once again reveal his glorious presence to its inhabitants (cf. Isa. 4:5; 24:23; 33:17; 60:2) and the nations (cf. 40:5; 66:18).

**1b.** The second stanza hints at who will see God's glory and how. They are described in three ways; as weak people whose hands are too exhausted for them to fend for themselves (cf. 2 Sam. 17:2; Job 4:3); tottering people whose knees are too shaky for them to take one step further (cf. Job 4:4); harassed people whose minds are under such stress that they are rash in their judgments and reckless in their be (cf. 2:4), The prophet tells some unnamed teacher to encourage and strengthen these people with the good news of God's coming to them (cf. 40:9; 62:11; Ps. 96:13; 98:9). They no longer have any reason to fear for themselves and their future, for their God himself will come to their rescue.

The translation of 'vengeance' and 'recompense' in the RSV could give us the wrong impression of what is involved. These words are to be taken as synonyms for salvation. The Hebrew word which is translated as 'vengeance' refers to the restoration of social equilibrium and moral order which have been damaged by injustice and evil. This restoration is associated with the rehabilitation of what's good and the annihilation of what is evil. The Hebrew word which is translated as 'recompense' refers to an act which brings good or evil to its final issue, its inevitable conclusion. So by his coming God sets things right for his people and their world. He puts an end to wickedness and vindicates his people, God's glory then is revealed by his advent as the saviour-judge of his people. He will most surely come to save his people. That is the good news which revives and strengthens them as they wait for it to happen.

**1c.** The third stanza explains what God's coming will do for his people. They themselves will be totally transformed. They will recover the full use of their senses. Those who are now blind will see, and those who are now deaf will hear. They will recover the full use of their legs. Those who are now lame will be able not only to walk, but also to leap about like a hart, that most agile and graceful of all animals. They will recover the full use of their tongues. Those who are now dumb will sing and shout for joy.

Now, it is quite true that God had promised to heal his people physically and restore them to perfect health in the new era of salvation (30:26; 33:24). This stanza affirms that, but it also goes further than that. It links the healing of blindness in 35:5 with the vision of God's glory in 35:2. It links the healing of deafness in 35:5 with the hearing of the message in 35:4. It links the healing of lameness in 35:6 with the paralysis in 35:3. But above all, it links the recovery of speech in 35:6 with the singing of God's people as they return home in 35:10.

The prophet here uses stock imagery from the tradition of wisdom. For centuries before him, the teachers of wisdom had used blindness as a metaphor for the lack of perception and insight, deafness for incomprehension and unteachability, paralysis as a metaphor for moral and spiritual impotence, and dumbness as a metaphor for thoughtlessness and stupidity. The job of a teacher was to open the eyes and ears of his student so that he could 'walk' and 'talk' properly. This passage re-echoes what the prophet had already said about the people's blindness to God in 6:9-10; 29:9-10,18, and 32:2; their deafness to his voice in 6:9-10; 28:12; 29:18; 30:9,11 and 32:3, and their dumb stupidity in 32:4-6. He had announced the imminence of a new era, when God himself would be their Teacher and lead them on the right way (30:20-21). So it is quite likely that this section is to be taken metaphorically. When God comes to save his people, he will change them physically and spiritually so that they will see him with their own eyes, hear him with their own ears, walk with him on the right way, and praise him with their own mouths.

**2a.** The first stanza in the second part of the poem picks up and develops one aspect of 35:1-2. It explains how the wilderness will become a fertile garden and forest. Springs of water will create this paradisaical landscape. They will turn the arid desert into a place of rivers and pools and swamps. These waters will be 'broached' where you would least expect them. The same word is used in Proverbs 3:20 for God's provision of fresh water for the earth at creation. There may then be a hint here of a new creation. As a result of this water, the ruined city which was otherwise good only for the unclean, despicable jackal (cf. 13:22; 34:13) comes to resemble the cities by the River Nile in Egypt. The reference to water can be taken both literally and metaphorically. As in 32:15, the prophet probably has in mind the gift of God's spirit which gives life to nature as well as to God's people (cf. 44:3-4).

**2b.** The second stanza begins to draw the threads of a poem together by describing the road on which those who are now paralysed will travel after they have been healed. Note how the word 'there' recurs in 8-9. The desert will be the location of a highway which leads the people home to God. Although it is not stated, the poem seems to imply that God himself will bring his people back home to Zion, as in 40:3, 9, 10. The image of the holy way was probably taken from the name of the main street that led up into the temple in Jerusalem. It was the processional way which the pilgrims took to come to worship God on Mt Zion. The same processional way is mentioned elsewhere in Isaiah. It was the way by which God's people returned home from exile to God (11:6; 43:16, 19; 49:11; 57:14; 62:10). Since it was God's way, the holy way that led into the sanctuary, the unclean are automatically excluded from it, just as they were excluded from worship in Jerusalem (Ps. 24:3 - 4; cf. Isa. 52:1.11); otherwise they would desecrate and defile it. Since the unclean no longer ascend that Holy Way, they will not be able to defile and desecrate the sanctity of the temple by their impurity. How they will be kept from it is left unexplained. But the implication is that all who pass on it will be clean and fit for God's presence. These pure people will see God.

The prophet identifies the Holy Way with the way of righteousness in the tradition of wisdom. The sages taught that this way led to life, just as the way of evil led to death. The sanctity of the temple had not only been defiled by the impurity of unclean people, but also tarnished by the behaviour of fools who went through the motions of worship, even though they did just as they pleased and lived as if there were no God. The prophet says that these amoral, cynical, godless fools will also be excluded from the Holy Way. At the time of God's advent, all God's people will be wise. Earlier on, the prophet had called the leaders of Judah, its nobility (32:5-7) as well as its prophets and priests (28:7), drunken fools who couldn't think straight and so erred in their understanding (29:24). They didn't just err mentally and physically; what was far worse, they misled the very people whom they should have been instructing (3:12; 9:15). Fools such as these would not be allowed on the Holy Way.

There is, finally, a third group which will be excluded from the Holy Way. No lion or predator will be found on it. So the pilgrims will be safe as they travel on it. It is once again likely that the reference to the lion is to be taken both literally and metaphorically. God had warned that he would send lions on those who broke his covenant (Lev. 26:22; Ezek. 5:17; 17:17). But the lion was also a stock poetic image for all human predators, whether social (Ps. 7:2; 10:9; 17:12) or political (Jer. 4:7; Joel 1:6; Micah 5:8; Nahum 2:11-12). In the era of salvation, the lion would cease to be a predator (11:7). No one and nothing would molest the pilgrims on the Holy Way.

After mentioning those who are excluded, the poem finally tells who will walk on the Holy Way. It will be open for those whom God has redeemed. So God himself qualifies the people for this way. Like a dutiful clansman, he will save the lives of his people and liberate them from slavery. He will give them back their status as his people and bring them back to their homeland, just as he once brought the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. So God himself will exclude all unclean people, all fools and every predator, because he will allow only those whom he has redeemed to travel on the Holy Way.

**2c.** The poem reaches its climax and conclusion in the last stanza. Since God himself pays the price which sets his people free, they have reason to sing and shout for joy as he brings them home. As they return, they discover the joy of repentance, the joy at returning home with God (cf. 9:13; 10:21-22; 31:16)

When they have come home to Zion, they will see God in his glory there, as promised in 35:2. What's more, they will celebrate a great festival with God which will differ from any of the previous festivals celebrated in the temple at Jerusalem. The three, great, traditional festivals had always been characterized by extraordinary gladness and joy. In fact, God had instituted them so that he could give 'joy' to his people, as they ate and drank in his presence (Deut. 16:15, cf. 12:12,18; 14:26; 16:11,14; 26:11; 27:7). But this festival would be different from those, because its 'joy' would not last just for a few days, but for ever. Troubles and disappointments would not be forgotten only for a few days, but forever because they would be no more (35:10; cf. 25:6-8). Instead, God's people would possess 'the joy of eternity' (cf. 61:7). There may be a hint of this phrase that God will share his own 'eternal joy' with his people who would live with him as his royal priests (cf. 61:6-7). This joy would rest like a royal crown (cf. 28:5; 62:3) or perfume on their heads (61:3).

So the poem culminates in the return of God's people from physical and spiritual exile to the visible presence of God on Mount Zion. It is possible to take the poem as a prophecy either of the return of the northern tribes to the worship of God at the temple in

Jerusalem after the Assyrian invasion (11:16), or of the return of the people of Judah from the Babylonian captivity (51:9-11). But I believe that it goes further than that. It promises the final procession of God's people to heavenly Jerusalem in the eschatological era of salvation.

### **C. SOME HOMILETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

1. The imagery in this prophecy is rather appropriate for us Australians who celebrate Christmas in the middle of summer, when much of our land is hot and dry. The time of the year mirrors the world which Christ enters at his birth - an arid wilderness, a dry land, a drought-stricken desert. His coming turns this desert into a watered, flourishing, happy place. The news of his Advent refreshes and strengthens those who are exhausted, paralysed, and harassed by the burden and heat of the summer.

2. This poem can be taken literally and metaphorically. Unlike most passages of prophecy, it lacks clear historical references and applications. This seems to be deliberate. It would be as wrong for us here to separate earthly Zion from heavenly Zion as to separate the visible Church from the invisible Church. You could then preach about the transformation which occurs to human lives and the Church, when the directive of Isaiah 35:3-4 is heeded, and the good news is proclaimed to exhausted, paralysed, distracted people, and the Spirit of God irrigates the wastelands of human endeavour. But, if you do so, you should not forget that the prophet proclaims and hopes for the final 'physical' healing of all disabled people and the ultimate 'physical' transformation of the earth in the era of salvation. It is interesting to note that Jesus interprets this healing ministry in Matthew 11:5 // Luke 7:21-22 as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Yet his healings were themselves also eschatological signs which anticipated the final healing at the resurrection.

3. This text gives the preacher a golden opportunity to proclaim the hope of glory which comes to us through the incarnation of our Lord. I believe that we don't preach enough about this topic from the Scriptures, and so our people very often form their own opinions about the life to come from non-Christian and sectarian sources. Here we have it all in a nutshell: the advent of our Lord, the end of sickness and trouble, the abolition of impurity, folly and evil, the righting of wrongs, the renewal of creation, the resurrection of the body, the celebration in song, the eternal joy of the Lord, and, above all, the vision of our Lord in all his majesty and glory. Not only will we see his glory, but we will share in this glory (35:2, cf. Rom. 5:2; 2 Thess. 1:10; 2:14; 2 Peter 1:3-4; 1 John 3:2).

4. This is the only part of Scripture which tells about the Way of Holiness. It inspired John Bunyan to write his *Pilgrim's Progress*, that great allegory of the Christian life. This passage shows us quite vividly how sanctification is the direct consequence of justification. It is Christ himself who has opened up for us the Way of Holiness, by which we return to God. He comes to us, rescues, heals, cleanses and enlightens us, so that we can go with him back to his Father and share in his holiness. Only those who are redeemed, purified, and sanctified will see the glory of God. That's what the writer to the Hebrews reminds us of. In 12:12-14 he uses our text to urge us to strive 'for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.' Our age needs to hear that truth again and again, for it would like to see God without undergoing the painful process of sanctification.

**5.** The poem begins and ends with singing and gladness. The Way of Holiness is not a dismal journey but the way of joy. Travel on it begins with joy, and ends with even greater joy. As Christians we are called to share in the joy of our Lord (Matt 25:21,23). The secular world does not and cannot know this joy; it is the joy of the angels and the joy of God himself. At the birth of Jesus this joy comes down to earth so that we too can join in with the angels in their praise and enjoyment of God (Luke 2:10-14). This joy which we share with the whole redeemed, natural world issues in the praise of God which unites us with the whole of God's creation (Ps. 148; Rev. 5:11-13). The end of it all is resounding praise as we see God to face.