

## “High Hopes: A Highway in the Wilderness” | Isaiah 35:1-10

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We continue this morning in our Advent series, *High Hopes*, where we are reflecting on the theme of hope in the prophet Isaiah.

One of my favorite things about book of Isaiah is how *vivid* it is. The prophet often uses rich imagery to help us better grasp our experience and God’s ways of working. Last week, the hope we have in God was displayed by the image of light breaking into darkness: “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa 9:2).

This Sunday we turn to Isaiah 35 where the imagery is different yet equally memorable. Here, hope is depicted as streams suddenly appearing in a desert, flowers suddenly blooming in a wasteland, and as finding a road that leads us home when we had felt otherwise lost.

Who this passage is meant for is clearly stated in verse 3-4:

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 (Isa 35:3-4).

God desires, through His Word this morning, to strengthen the weary and calm the anxious: “*hold fast,*” he says, “I will come to save you!”

In our exploration of biblical hope, today we consider what this image of a desert turning into a garden, and a holy highway, tell us about our confidence that our future is good because it is in the hands of God.

### I. The Desert: Hardship and Judgement

Let’s first consider the setting of a wilderness or desert, where verse 1 begins:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus (Isa 35:1)

In order to appreciate what it means that “the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus” (35:1), we have to feel the heat and deadness of this wilderness.

Wilderness imagery can convey two different, though related, things in Scripture.

#### Desert as Human Hardships

On the one hand, the wilderness speaks to our experiences of hardship. Certainly, in this passage it has in mind the oppression Israel experiences from Assyria and then Babylon. Wilderness imagery can also capture our lived experiences of weariness, sadness, brokenness and loneliness.

In this sense, God turning the desert into a garden speaks of God saving us from *things that happen to us*.

### Desert as Divine Judgement

But at a deeper level, desert and wilderness imagery in Scripture speaks not merely of things happening to us, but to the ramifications of things *we ourselves have done*. The first appearance of desert or wilderness imagery in Scripture comes in Genesis 3 where it conveys God's judgement on humanity's sin:

cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you (Gen 3:17-18).

This is the context we need to see at work in Isaiah 35—God is saving not just from our hardships, but from His judgement. From Isaiah 13-34 judgement has been the building theme. God announces coming judgement against Babylon (chs 13), Assyria (ch 14:24,) Moab (ch 15), Damascus (ch 17), Cush (ch 18), Egypt (ch 19), Tyre and Sidon (ch 23). And finally, against the whole world:

Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.... The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt (Isa 24:1, 3-6).

Just before our passage, Isaiah 34 finds God announcing this universal judgement:

The LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. (Isa 34:1).

And listen to how God's judgement on the world's sin turns Israel's southeastern nemesis, Edom, into an uninhabitable desert:

the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. <sup>10</sup> Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation, it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it forever and ever. princes shall be nothing.... <sup>13</sup> Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals. (Isa 34:9-10; 13).

In order to appreciate the garden that burst forth in the desert in Isaiah 35, we need to appreciate that God is delivering people from more than disappointment and oppression—he is delivering them from His Judgement.

This judgement is **universal**, for **everyone**: "O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it." And notice with what **terribly imagery** it is described:

The LORD has a sword; it is sated with blood; it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom (Isa 34:6).

We tend to shy away from these portions of Scripture. But listen to how our Lord, Jesus Christ, likens God's future judgement to the Great Flood and volcanic destruction of Sodom:

Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. <sup>27</sup> They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. <sup>28</sup> Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, <sup>29</sup> but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— <sup>30</sup> so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed" (Luke 17:26-30).<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, our two points about hope to draw from our passage's imagery of wilderness:

**Your hope for justice!** *Christians who are discouraged by the injustices they see in the world that go unpunished, rest assured, your God will come with recompense!* God's coming judgement saves us from feeling we need to take retribution into our own hands in this life—because we have hope things will not be, ultimately, swept under the rug.

**Your hope for mercy!** But second, this passage shows us we need hope that delivers us from the judgement of God *we are under*. And Christians can rest assured that God has made a way for us to pass through judgement by His Son.

On the Cross, Jesus Christ absorbed the wrath of God for the sins of anyone who puts their trust in him. God's justice is upheld in Christ; and God's mercy and forgiveness is extended toward you.

If you are not a Christian, can I ask you what you will do with your sin when you stand before God? Many worldviews today—sadly, even some so-called Christian voices—will tell you that sin is not your problem, just brokenness. Friend, the judgement of God does not get poured out on brokenness; it gets poured out on sin. What will you do with your sin when you stand before God? Other religions will tell you that if you live a good life, if you try hard, then you'll be fine when you stand before God. But Christianity alone tells you that God himself has made a way to deal with your sin—to his own hurt—so you can stand before him.

The hope of Isaiah 35 is hope for deliverance not just from sadness but judgement.

Let's turn now from the desert to the Garden breaking forth and the Highway running through—let's turn to the promise of salvation in verse 4, "He [=God] will come and save you." How does the vision of salvation in this passage give a hope that strengthens the weak and anxious? It does so in three ways.

## II. The Garden and Highway: God's Way of Salvation

**First, this salvation is the supernatural action of God,** and toward the weak and needy.

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<sup>1</sup> See also, "Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town." (Matt 10:15)

It is “God who comes to save” in verse 4, and that salvation is described as the blind receiving sight, the deaf hearing, the lame leaping, the mute singing (vv5-6). This very thing marks Jesus’ ministry.

The imagery is meant to be exhaustive: eyes, ears, legs, speech—the whole person. And it is both physical and spiritual. God will open the eyes of those who are blind, spiritually, too. Remember the judgement that Isaiah was to pronounce to them:

Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”<sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:8-10).

There is not a power that God cannot topple. There is not a sickness He will not one day overcome. There is not a harden heart God cannot soften. The most powerful forces in Isaiah’s world were as nothing to God: Not Egypt. Not Assyria. Not Babylon. Not Sin. Not death. And neither are they today.

Is there anywhere in your life, or this world, where you are tempted to think change or salvation is impossible? Is there anywhere in your life you are relying too much on your own strength? What might it look like to invite God into this space?

A Christian who hopes does not rely on his own powers but on the help and power of God.

### **Second, this salvation involves a transformation of the entire world:**

For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. (Isa 35:6-7).

This imagery reminds us that God’s salvation involves all of his creation. We think of passages like Romans 8:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:20-21).

We can hope in God putting all creation back to order.

There are many ways that people, both Christians and non-Christians, improve our world. We see it in medicine and technology especially. If we get sick today, we are far better off than those living three-hundred years ago. Because we are all created in God’s image, we are endowed with gifts from our creator we can use to bring about real progress in our world. Human ingenuity could even design an irrigation system that brings “streams to the desert” (Isa 35:6) in Israel!

But don’t you see that even as progress happens, human beings are still killing in record numbers? And do you know that in the most successful countries, rates of depression typically go up not down.

In his book, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Patrick Deneen noted that many societies that advanced around individual rights and freedom from religious constraints ended up with less happy people. He famously writes, “Among the greatest challenges facing humanity is the ability to survive progress.”

Andrew Sullivan, in an article titled “The World Is Better Than Ever: Why Are We Miserable?” adds:

As we have slowly and surely attained more progress, we have lost something that undergirds all of it: meaning, cohesion, and a different, deeper kind of happiness than the satiation of all our earthly needs.<sup>2</sup>

While we can do actual good in our own powers, the salvation Isaiah 35 speaks of deals with God lifting the actual curse that is upon creation. And at the heart of that curse is the absence of God himself. Only God’s return can make the world right again—and give people order and meaning. Back in verse 2, it is not the botanical glory that is most resplendent—but the glory of the Lord:

the desert shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the **glory of the LORD**, the **majesty of our God** (Isa 35:2).

Christian hope is rooted in the transforming power of the presence—the glory and majesty—of God coming back into this world, into our own lives.

**Third and finally, salvation places us on a Highway home.** Isaiah conveys this with some of the most beautiful words in Scripture:

And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And 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 (Isa 35:8-10).

The image of a highway carried much significance for Israelites. It called to mind trips during days of peace when pilgrims from all over the nation made their way to the Holy City, Zion (Jerusalem) for feasts such as Passover. These were times when the people come to present their offerings to the Lord, to be together as God’s people, and to worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness.

The highway also brought to mind deliverance from exile: when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, through the red sea, and through the wilderness to the promise land. And God

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<sup>2</sup> Accessed online, Dec 13, 2025: <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/03/sullivan-things-are-better-than-ever-why-are-we-miserable.html>

will in fact bring back Israel from exile in Babylon—a miraculous deliverance. And we can think of many other times when God made a highway where there seemed to be no way.

Reading this passage today, we see that this Highway is the “narrow path” of following Jesus Christ—Think of what Jesus said of himself: “I am the way” in John 14. And recall that Christians were first called “followers of the way” (Acts). The highway speaks of following Christ on our sojourn through this life enroute to our heavenly home.

What might it mean to think of hope as a highway—highway we walk toward the City of God, heaven?

In his reflections on Hope, German Christian and philosopher **Josef Pieper** describes the Christian life with the Latin phrase, *status viatoris*, which means, “the state of being on the way.”<sup>3</sup> It is a way of describing the biblical language of pilgrim or life as pilgrimage (sojourn).<sup>4</sup>

This image is a helpful way to think of the present experience of Christian hope: *Christians are people on the way.*

God puts us on this highway through Christ. Notice it is a road for redeemed: “the redeemed shall walk there” (Isa 35:8). It is not the road you walk in order to get redeemed; it is the road God puts us on when he comes into our lives, saves us, and by his Spirit, leads us toward home.

And notice the confidence and joy of the travelers, “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 (v 10).

This image of the highway helps explain present **non-fulfillment** and pain: we are not yet there.

But it also helps undergird our hope that our longings will be fulfilled and pain finally removed: “sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” Does this not remind us of that wonderful promise at the close of Revelation,

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Rev 21:4).

For those on this Highway, headed to Zion, you can know this: there is not a trial that will outlast you. There is not a tear that will not be wiped away. The people of God are those making progress toward eternal happiness. And there is such hope in that. So stand strong. Hold on. Keep going!

As your pastor, I am here to help you along this road—even as I have been helped by so many others.

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<sup>3</sup> Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 91.

<sup>4</sup> “Beloved, I urge you as **sojourners** and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” (1 Peter 2:11).

I'd like to close with some words from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pastor Charles Spurgeon, capturing his calling to strengthen the weak knees, and encourage the people on this Highway:

I am occupied, in my small way, as Mr. Great-heart was employed in Bunyan's day. I do not compare myself with that champion, but I am in the same line of business. I am engaged in personally conducted tours to Heaven.... It is my business, as best I can, to kill dragons and cut off giants' heads, and to lead on the timid and trembling. I am often afraid of losing some of the weaklings; I have the heart-ache for them; but by God's grace, and your kind and generous help in looking after one another, I hope we shall all travel safely to the river's edge. Oh, how many have I had to part with there! I have stood on the brink, and I have heard them singing in the midst of the stream, and I have almost seen the shining ones lead them up the hill and through the gates into the Celestial City.<sup>5</sup>

God has come for you, dear Christian! You are on your way! Hold on. Keep going.

### Isaiah 35 | Small Group Questions

1. The people of God in Isaiah 35 start out in a "wilderness," "dry land," and "desert" (35:1). In Scripture, wilderness can describe our lived experience of weariness, injustice and sorrow, but also God's judgement on our sin. How does seeing the desert as judgement (not just hardship) deepen or challenge your understanding of hope? Where do you experience desert if your life right now—personally, socially or spiritually?
2. Isaiah 35 promises, "your God will come with vengeance, with recompense" (35:4). How does certainty of God's future justice shape the way Christians deal with the injustices of this life? In what ways does it free us from despair, bitterness or a lust for retribution?
3. This passage emphasizes God's coming salvation (35:4), especially for the weak (blind, deaf, lame, mute, 35:5). Why is it important that biblical hope is rooted in God's *supernatural power*, not human power? Is there anywhere in your life, or this world, where you are tempted to think change or salvation is impossible? Is there anywhere in your life you are relying too much on your own strength? What might it look like to invite God into this space?
4. A beautiful image in Isaiah 35 comes in verse 8, "For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert." Have you ever experienced God's presence and love in the desert? How has this impacted how you hope in God?
5. Isaiah 35 concludes with the image of God's people walking the Highway, the "Way of Holiness" (35:8). How does the image of the Christian life as "being on the way" rather than as "an instant arrival" impact your expectations? How does this image help you interpret ongoing struggles, delays, or unfulfillments? How does the assurance of the joy

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<sup>5</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records* (Vol. 2: *Seeking the Soul of Men*, Chicago/New York/Toronto: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899), p. 131.

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that is ahead (35:10) encourage you to keep waling today? What are some things that have “strengthened your weak hands and feeble knees” (35:3) as you’ve walked this path?

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