THE MESSIAH’S REIGN OF JOY

Isaiah 35:1–10

Key Verse: 35:10

“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.”

Last week we saw how the coming of our Messiah Jesus brings peace to people at war with each other. People today desperately need peace, both inner peace and peace with others. Many people quote the famous saying: “No justice, no peace.” But there’s a Christian saying to counteract it: “Know Jesus, know peace.” Our Messiah Jesus brings us real peace because he helps us know God through his grace of forgiveness of sins. The grace of Jesus revealed in his crucifixion fully satisfies God’s perfect justice. So he brings us real peace with God, and real peace with others. When his grace rules our souls, we can forgive ourselves, as well as all kinds of people, even our worst enemies.

Today we want to think about how the coming of Jesus brings us joy. How do you view joy? Some people equate joy with being emotional, getting too excited, or even being superficial. Experiencing life’s harsh realities can make joy seem unreal. That’s why, for many people the Christmas season with all its singing and celebrations can seem annoying. After going through a hard year of quarantine, political and social strife, and painful human and economic loss, many people can’t even begin to think about joy. But in today’s passage we find the expression “everlasting joy.” This is not an emotional or superficial thing; it’s a joy of soul mentioned in the Psalms (Ps63:5; 71:23; 84:2). In one of his most famous psalms David wrote, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps16:11; cf. Ac2:28). Our Lord Jesus promised us this same joy when he said, “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn16:22). How can true joy become real in our lives? And why does the coming of Jesus bring us joy? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

The prophecies of Isaiah 34 and 35 go together. Chapter 34 describes God’s day of judgment for people’s rebellion against him. But chapter 35 describes the wonderful day when God will redeem his precious people and bring them back to live with him forever. It’s some of the most beautiful poetry ever written. Though he’s not mentioned, it’s really a prophecy of the coming of Jesus.

Look at verses 1,2a. The “wilderness” and “dry land” are a metaphor for the fallen world all around us. Our world was made this way by human arrogance. Pride may seem great at the time, but it eventually leaves things in ruins. Isaiah’s descriptive words suggest a desolate, lonely place where there’s no life, where nothing is able to grow, a place that’s so hard to travel through. This fallen world has always been like a spiritual wilderness, a place of harsh conditions, meaningless toil and pain (Ge4:12). But Isaiah saw a vision that such a place would become “glad” and “rejoice and blossom like the crocus.” A crocus is a small flower that blooms in late winter, after much harsh weather, before any other thing begins to grow. Crocuses can transform a cold, barren field in Central Asia into a place bursting with beautiful life and color, even when there’s still snow on the ground. Isaiah says that with such abundant blossoms even a wilderness would rejoice with joy and singing. Apostle Paul wrote: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Ro8:20,21).

Isaiah goes on to describe this glory. Read verse 2b. Lebanon was world-famous for its mountains covered with thick forests of fragrant cedar trees. Carmel is a mountain range in northwestern Israel about 67 miles from Jerusalem. Its sloped plain is covered with luxuriant vegetation, including oak, pine, olive and laurel trees. Sharon is a fertile plain just to the west of the Carmel range, along the Mediterranean coast, famous for its distinctive “rose of Sharon.” The glory and majesty of Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon were their stunningly beautiful and lush vegetation. Much of the surrounding area is rather dry and desert-like, but God is able to make these places flourish with spectacular beauty. To Isaiah, this points to the glory of God who is able to turn a spiritual wilderness into a most gorgeous and fruitful place. This is what happens wherever Jesus our Messiah comes to reign.

Meditating on God’s glory seen in creation, how does Isaiah want people to respond to it? Read verses 3,4. Here we find people with “weak hands,” “feeble knees” and “an anxious heart.” Who is Isaiah talking about? He’s talking about God’s people who have to travel through life in this spiritual wilderness. We develop weak hands, feeble knees and an anxious heart when we experience life in this cursed world. The road is too long, the way is too difficult, too lonely, and we feel overwhelmed. It all seems too painful and meaningless. We’re too weak to go on, and we just want to quit. But Isaiah, like a personal trainer in a gym, says, “Strengthen those weak hands! Firm up those feeble knees! Don’t be afraid! Be strong!” How can we do those things? We need to set our sights on God’s glory. The glory we see now all around us in nature is like a promise of our future glory in Christ.

Read verse 4b. Here Isaiah switches to the hope that God will bring his justice on earth. The words “vengeance” and “recompense” basically mean “pay back.” Why is Isaiah suddenly talking about this? It’s because God’s people have to live not only in a world that’s under curse, but also among people who sin freely and who use and abuse them. This may be even more demoralizing than having to endure physical hardships. When people seem to get away with all kinds of evil and do harm to God’s people, it can seem futile to go on. But God promises that one day he will come and deal with it all. This promise was fulfilled partially when our Lord Jesus came first to this world, cleansing the temple and rebuking hypocrisy. But it will be fulfilled fully when our Messiah Jesus comes again someday. Just as oppressed people rejoice and celebrate when a tyrant is toppled, so one day God’s people will rejoice greatly when our Messiah Jesus brings God’s justice to our world and saves all those who trusted in him.

Isaiah goes on to describe his salvation. Read verses 5,6a. Here the metaphor switches from nature to people. Isaiah mentions the blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute. All these people have in common an incurable disease, something that makes them feel less than others, helpless, dependent, and really sad. In our world we never see blind, deaf, lame or mute people being restored; it’s just something they have to live with. But the word “Then” in verse 5 points to a future day, a day, verse 4b says, when God would come to save. This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus came and healed the blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute, proving that he really was our long-awaited Messiah (Lk7:22). But these healings also show how Jesus came to heal our spiritual diseases. We can be spiritually blind to see God and what he’s doing. We can be spiritually deaf to hear what God is trying to tell us. We can be spiritually lame, too powerless to get up and do what God wants. We can be spiritually mute, completely unable to praise God. These spiritual sicknesses leave us dark and ignorant and sorrowful and full of complaints. But our Messiah Jesus can heal us in every single way. He can open our spiritual eyes to really see, and open our ears to really start listening to God. He can help us get up and start walking in his footsteps, following his example, and singing joyfully. We can be so slow to change; in fact, sometimes it may seem like we never do. But the spiritual healing that Jesus brings is even more powerful and more joyful than physical healing.

Read verse 6b. This is a poetic description of the source of these amazing healings. What is it? It’s the “waters” that “break forth in the wilderness” and “streams in the desert.” What are these waters and streams? Our Lord Jesus once said, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (Jn7:37,38). This living water is the Holy Spirit Jesus promised to give those who believe in him (Jn7:39). The Spirit quenches our souls so thirsty from living in this spiritual wilderness. The Spirit also brings us deep inner spiritual healing. He’s the one who opens our eyes and ears and empowers us to walk and jump and sing. But it doesn’t happen automatically. This is why the Bible urges us to ask for the Spirit, live according to the Spirit, set our minds on the things of the Spirit, walk by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit (Lk11:13; Ro8:5,6; Gal5:16,25). When our Lord Jesus fills us with the Holy Spirit, our lives are full of joy.

As we struggle to serve God in this barren world, we can easily become spiritually dry. It becomes hard even to pray or open the Bible. But our Messiah Jesus promises us “streams in the desert.” This phrase became the title of the famous Christian devotional book written by Lettie Cowman. She and her husband went as missionaries to Japan in 1901 and founded the Oriental Mission Society, now known as the One Mission Society, working in 77 nations and partnering with over 180 denominations and evangelical organizations. Lottie’s devotional book was based on her own agonies and fellowship with God as she returned from the mission field and had to watch her husband slowly die of ill health. The book has sold millions of copies and is in its 78th printing, and it still helps people going through really tough times to experience “streams in the desert” in Jesus. His streams given “in the desert” give us real joy.

Read verses 8,9. Here the highlight is the “highway.” It’s a vivid image for pilgrims making a long journey. When a road is bumpy, winding and full of holes, travel is much harder, and we easily can go astray. But when it’s a smooth and straight highway, travel is so much easier. Isaiah says this is a spiritual highway, only for “the redeemed.” Who are they? They are those who’ve accepted the blood of Jesus for their sins. Because of his shed blood they fully commit to living a holy life. It’s like the toll we have to pay to get on this highway—confessing our faith in the blood of Jesus and resolving to walk in his way. On this highway God protects us from all kinds of evil beasts. On this highway, even though we have to make an arduous journey, we’re so joyful. God gives us this highway because he loves us and really wants us to come back to him without any hindrance. It’s our Messiah Jesus who enables us to walk on this highway.

Read verse 10. This tells us that the highway is headed to a place called Zion. It’s a mountain in Jerusalem that became synonymous with the city itself, and a symbol of the New Jerusalem, which God promises as our eternal home. What’s going on there? It says “singing.” Lots of singing. Everlasting joy and gladness. We will be so joyful in this heavenly city because we’ll finally get to be at home with God forever. Isaiah concludes, “…and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” He repeats this same phrase in 51:11. In heaven God will totally eliminate all our sorrow and crying (Isa25:8; 60:20; 65:19). Only this beautiful hope can erase all our sorrow and sighing and replace them with real joy and gladness. This Christmas may each one of us open our hearts newly to our Messiah Jesus and experience this amazing joy he gives us in this barren world.