

The Desert and the Garden

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to sing again. No, we're not. We're going to read the Bible first before we sing, and we're going to turn to Isaiah chapter 34 and 35. And I think that is page 594, if you have one of our blue visitor's Bibles.

And we're going to read these two chapters together that we're looking at this evening in English, and then Saeed is going to come and read in Farsi for our Farsi speakers who are joining with us in the service this evening, most of whom are downstairs, but will be studying with us.

So we're going to read chapter 34 and chapter 35, and you'll see that the focus here is very much on the great day of the Lord, and all that that means, both in judgment and in glorious salvation.

So the prophet says, 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.

[2 : 0 9] Wild oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall drink its fill of blood. Their soil shall be gorged with fat.

For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. And the streams of Eden shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur.

Her land shall become burning pitch. 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. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it. The owl and the raven shall dwell in it. He shall stretch the line of confusion over it and the plumb line of emptiness.

Its nobles. There's no one there to call it a kingdom. And all its princes shall be nothing. Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortress.

[3 : 1 2] It shall be the haunt of jackals and abode for ostriches. And wild animals will meet with hyenas. The wild goat shall cry to his fellow. Indeed, the night bird settles and finds herself a resting place.

There the owl nests and lays and hatches and gathers her young in their shadow. Indeed, there the hawks are gathered, each one with her mate. Seek and read from the book of the Lord.

Not one of these shall be missing. None shall be without her mate. For the mouth of the Lord has commanded and his spirit has gathered them. He has cast a lot for them.

His hand has portioned it out to them with the line. They shall possess it forever. From generation to generation they shall dwell in it. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy in singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it. The majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

[4 : 1 6] They shall see the glory of the Lord. The majesty of our God. 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 with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

For waters break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water. In the haunts of jackals where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

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.

[5 : 2 0] Even if they're fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall come upon it. They shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. And they shall obtain gladness and joy.

And sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Amen. Give us to his word. Now, if you could please turn to page 594 again to chapters 34 and 35 of Isaiah.

And we'll have a moment of prayer. Indeed, Father, we do pray that the breath of God, the living Holy Spirit himself, who inspired these words, and who inspired them, not just for their own generation, but for us, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

We may indeed hear his voice, that we may follow in his ways, that you will open our eyes, you will open our minds, and above all, that you will work upon our wills, until our wills are wholly thine.

[6 : 3 9] And we ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, sometimes there are programs on television where the announcer says something like, there are scenes in this program which some viewers will find disturbing.

This can happen in the news. It can happen in other programs. Now, when we read a chapter like chapter 34 of Isaiah, undoubtedly we find it disturbing.

And it's meant to be disturbing. It's not a passage that we relish. It's not a passage that we instantly are attracted to. And yet, it's hugely, hugely important.

Because, as Willie said earlier on, these are the two sides of the story. And I want to say a couple of things about this before we look at the chapters themselves. First of all, look at chapter 34.

What happens there is the logical result when human sin and violence run riot. We look at these bombed cities in the Middle East.

[7 : 5 6] We look at horrific scenes of violence and bloodshed. And we realize that this world is under a curse. This is, in other words, there is nothing here that we don't see on our screens.

And it's not just today, of course. I saw part, I wish I'd seen the whole of it, an interesting program last week on the horrific battle of Passchendaele in the First World War.

For, as you know, in these years, a hundred years since the war, which was called the Great War, there have been many, many programs, many, many pictures.

And in some ways, in the old photography, it's even more horrific. The soldiers staggering about, blinded with gas, wounded, knee-deep in mud.

A horrific landscape. Siegfried Sassoon, one of the poets of the First World War, wrote this. I died in hell. They called it Passchendaele.

[8 : 55] And it's part of the story of human misery, of human violence. You see, if the king is going to reign, the last few weeks, we looked at the king who is to come.

The king who will reign in righteousness, will be a shelter against the storm. He has to judge. He has to deal with evil. He has to deal with violence.

And there is no gloating here. Many ancient texts you read about the fall of enemies. And it's absolutely full of gloating. Full of rejoicing over this.

There's nothing of that here. This is saying, when the king comes, he will come in judgment. As well as in salvation. And so far, Isaiah has been calling people to turn to God.

Right at the very beginning. Chapter 1, verse 18. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they will be as wool.

[9 : 58] And these last chapters have really dealt with the crisis of the Assyrian invasion, which is going to be described in chapters 36 and 37. This moves away from that to the end itself.

This is a natural division in the book, where Isaiah is summing up the previous message and saying, this is how it's going to end. Now, pagan view of history was the pendulum swung endlessly.

There were good times and bad times. And you just had to hope you were lucky enough to be in one of the good times. But the Bible says there is an end.

The kingdom will come. The pendulum will not swing forever. But just glance for a moment at the beginning, at the end of chapter 35 and the beginning of chapter 36.

Chapter 35, 10. This glorious song, the redeemed of the Lord shall return and come with singing to Zion. Then 36, verse 1.

[11 : 02] And remember, in ancient Hebrew text, there are no chapter and verse divisions. In the 14th year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.

And he sent his commander-in-chief from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, to King Hezekiah at Zion. You see, these two verses have been deliberately put together.

The reality is the Assyrians are thundering at the gates of Zion. That's the visible reality. The reality that the faith sees is that one day the king will come and Zion will be established forever.

The book is very carefully organized. Perhaps Isaiah himself, in old age, put the book together, or perhaps his disciples. It's not necessarily chronological.

Something doesn't have to be chronological in order to be true. And we mustn't think he started preaching at chapter 1, verse 1, and 50 years later, reached the end of chapter 66.

[12 : 04] That's not the way it works. This is a book collecting his sermons, his sayings, and his writings over all that period, very carefully organized.

And here, the end is coming. And the end is either a desert or a garden. That's our subject tonight. The desert and the garden. The desert in chapter 34 and the garden in 35.

So, first of all then, the desert. Now, as in chapter 1, and later in chapter 41 and 42, God summons the nations to his judgment seat.

And the passage which recalls us at the end of the Bible, Revelation 20, I saw a great white throne, the one who sat on it before whose face heaven and earth fled away.

These words picked up in the hymn we sang earlier. The great white throne, the judgment seat of God, and everyone who has ever lived stood before it.

[13 : 09] The small and the great were there. No one can say, oh, I'm too insignificant. No one can say, oh, I'm too important. Everyone is there. That is the judgment on history, if you like, which is still to come.

But the judgments in history foreshadow that. It's the picture of the law court. God is always calling us to his law court. That's chapter 1 again.

Come now, let us reason together. The word there is the law court. That is why we need an advocate before the throne of God above. So, two things here.

First of all, the God who judges. Chapter 34, verse 2. The Lord is enraged. The Lord is angry. Anger is God's strange work.

Exodus describes God as slow to anger. It's not that God's anger is not genuine. Indeed, it is far more genuine than human anger.

[14 : 12] When we talk about anger, the last word we use is slow, isn't it? We talk about a short fuse, a quick temper. God is not like that. And Peter tells in his second letter that God is slow to anger to give people time to repent.

Continually calling, continually asking people to come. Repentance and faith. And the picture here is of the last day when the king sits on the judgment seat on the great white throne.

A picture, of course, a metaphor. But the point about pictures and metaphors is to actually embody a deeper reality. We must all stand, says Paul, before the judgment seat of Christ.

Now, some have tried to water this down and say what the judgment of God really is, it's like a live wire. If you touch the live wire, you'll be severely burned.

You'll probably be killed. There's no emotion in it. There's nothing personal about it. Firstly, that sounds almost quite comforting, doesn't it?

[15 : 24] Long ago, C.S. Lewis pointed out that a live wire is just as much of a metaphor as a king sitting on his throne.

But the difference is, outraged majesty can forgive. A live wire cannot. If God's justice is like a live wire, if God's justice is like electricity, then we are truly shut up to despair.

There is no possibility of forgiveness. The live wire will not forgive. The enraged king on the throne can and does forgive if we come to him through the advocates, the one who comes and stands for us in the presence of God.

Another of the great scenes about the judgment, Paul in Romans 8 says, Who shall condemn us? It is Christ who died, who is risen again, and is at the right hand of God interceding for us.

The God who judges is angry. That anger is totally just. Our anger is seldom totally just, is it not? It's often injured vanity. Whereas God sees the entire scene.

[16 : 37] Often we are angry because we don't see the full picture. And when we realize what the truth of the matter is, we're rather ashamed. Whereas God judges totally justly, sees everything, understands everything.

Not only what a person is doing, but the person's motives, the person's, and the inner thoughts, which we can never know. That's the first thing, the God who judges.

Secondly, the nature of the judgment. First of all, this is universal. This is a universal judgment. Verse 2, the Lord is enraged against all the nations, against all the peoples.

Not a single nation, not a single ethnic group, not a single section of humanity is exempt from this. Indeed, it's the whole universe that's involved.

It's not just the human world. Verse 4, all the hosts of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. The book is complete.

[17 : 41] It's time to close it. You see, the scroll is rolled up. History is over. It's time now for the verdict.

The language is violent, of course. This is verse 5, the sword has drunk its fill in the heavens, and so on. It's very interesting, actually. Judgment, as I say, is totally fair.

And if you read the account in the book of Genesis, in chapter 6 and following, of that event which foreshadows the last judgment, Peter talks about this, that as it were, and Jesus himself as it was in the days of Noah.

So it will be in the days of the Son of Man. The Genesis account says, God said, I will destroy humanity because they have become corrupt.

In Hebrew, the word corrupt and the word destroy are part of the same verb. You could equally say, I will destroy humanity because it has self-destructed.

[18 : 46] This is the fairness of the judgment. Humanity has defied God. As Paul says in Romans, Paul talks about the terrible divine hands-off in Romans 1.

God gave them over to a corrupt mind. The whole of the earth, the whole of the universe, the whole of the created order will be judged because all of the created order has been cursed.

Remember with the fall of Adam, it wasn't just humanity. It was the whole of the cosmos, the earth, and so on. But then it focuses down on 5.

It descends for judgment upon Edom, the old enemy. Once again, the story of Jacob and Esau back in Genesis. These two brothers and their bitter enmity.

And in the little prophetic book of Obadiah, Edom is singled out for judgment because when the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem, they joined and mocked and sneered at their age-old enemy being destroyed.

[19 : 50] The ceaseless hostility between Jacob and Esau that runs through the whole of the Old Testament. Malachi talks about this as well at the very end. It's very interesting.

The Edomites were only ever conquered by King David. And in these chapters, the king who is to come is David come again, the David who is to come.

So Edom symbolizes the nations, all of the nations, but in particular this nation, which had proved to be such a thorn in the flesh.

And you'll notice the vivid pictures. The Lord has, verse 6, a sacrifice in Bozrah, great slaughter in the land of Edom. And the Lord has a day of vengeance.

Verse 8, the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch or soil, into sulfur and burning pitch. The effects of war and of violence. And then in verse 11, the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it.

[20 : 55] The oil and the raven shall dwell in it. And he shall stretch the line of confusion over it and the plumb line of emptiness. Now, these words are words which are translated differently at the beginning of our Bibles.

The whole earth, we are told, was darkness and desolation. What's happening here in Edom and in the judged world is like the chaos and darkness before the flood.

And we think of judgment as a desert. And we think of judgment as God carrying out his anger. This is the end result of a life without the Spirit of God, is it not?

We're told that in Genesis 1, the darkness and desolation were removed from the Spirit of God, hovered over it. And when God said, let there be light.

So, Edom will be destroyed. Smoke go up forever. Generation to generation, it shall be waste. And then this vivid picture of the thorns and the nettles and thistles in its fortresses.

[22 : 01] Remember, this is addressed to God's people as the whole of the Bible is. And tragically, in the book of Lamentations, in a much later generation, this is the language that's going to be used of Zion itself, of the judge city of Jerusalem.

This is not about other people. This is about us when we turn our back on God. And we know what's going to happen. And verse 16, seek and read from the book of the Lord.

Not one of these shall be missing, for the mouth of the Lord has commanded, and his Spirit will gather them, anticipating the gathering of the faithful in Zion at the end time.

The desert at the beginning, the darkness and desolation, will return in the judgment of God. And it's a solemn and terrifying passage.

We need to read it, and we need to learn from it, and we need to realize that there is nothing trivial about God and about his judgment.

[23 : 10] But then the garden in chapter 35. Judgment is not the last word. This is a glorious chapter. Alec Matier, in the commentary I have so often recommended in this series, says, sometimes even Isaiah excels himself.

And this poem is particularly joyful, full of light, full of joy, full of hope, full of the future. And the wilderness, notice what is going to rejoice?

The desert is going to be transformed. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. A thousand pities the translators have used this prosy word crocus instead of rose, particularly since they've no idea what the flower is.

All we know is that it's a flower. So why not, since it's a glorious poem, use the poetic word? I don't often quote Robert Burns, but I can't imagine him writing, my love is like a yellow, yellow crocus.

Rose is obviously a far more fitting translation here in this great poem. A couple of questions. When is this going to happen?

[24 : 21] Now, remember we've often noticed in prophecy that there are different layers of meaning. The prophet is speaking to his own time, first of all. He's speaking to the time of the Messiah, when the Messiah comes first, and then when the time yet future to us as it was to Isaiah.

And when Isaiah and the other prophets before the exile speak this way, they are first and foremost thinking of the return of the people from Babylon to rebuild Zion.

That's the initial meaning. And you read about that in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, about how the temple, the city was built, and God's people once again began to worship in the place that God had appointed.

That was pretty downbeat, though. You know, the desert didn't blossom, even like the crocus, far less than the rose at that time. But the point is, it still showed that God was with them.

That had to happen. If, as Malachi said, the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, there had to be a temple for him to return to.

[25 : 41] And I think the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the other books I mentioned are very important books for times like this, when so often we think the cause of God is going into reverse rather than triumphing.

God was still with them, and God is still with us today. It's more fully fulfilled in Jesus' earthly ministry.

When he did the kind of things that are mentioned here, there was a time when John the Baptist was in great distress.

He was in prison, and he sent his disciples to Jesus and said, Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for someone else? And Jesus says, Go and tell John, The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dead are raised.

He doesn't say to John's disciples, Oh, go back and tell John he ought to have faith. He ought never to have doubted. No, he said, Look, John is human. John needs proof.

[26 : 51] And here's the proof. What the prophet said, what Isaiah says here, for example, this is actually happening. But even that wasn't the absolute fulfillment.

These were token miracles. Now by token, I don't mean gesture miracles. What I mean is they were selective. Three people were raised from the dead, but the cemeteries didn't empty.

And these three people would die again. Some were healed, some were not healed. Some believed, and some did not believe. And that's why faith is still needed.

Verses 3 and 4. Strengthen the weak hands. Make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, Be strong. Fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance.

This is a fulfillment of an earlier prophecy in Isaiah. Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us. God, God, as John Bettsman said, God was man in Palestine.

[27 : 53] And that's what happened then. It's an anticipation of what will happen fully. We'll come with vengeance, with the recompense. Once again, the two sides, the vengeance and the recompense.

He will come and save you. But, the actual fulfillment lies in the future for us, as it did for Isaiah, as it did for people during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

So when did it happen? It happened when the people returned. It happened in the earthly ministry of Jesus. It happened again, of course, in the descent of the spirits. When the infant church set on its way by an outpouring of the spirit from on high, which Isaiah has prophesied in an earlier chapter, and the wonderful things that were happening.

So, when will it happen? It has happened. It is happening. But it is still to happen. Sometimes called the three tenses of salvation. Saved in the past.

Being saved now. But still to be saved in the future. Let's not forget any of these dimensions. Last century in Edinburgh, there's a famous preacher, J.S. Stewart, who also lectured in New College, in Edinburgh.

[29 : 12] And one earnest American student said to him was, Dr. Stewart, when were you converted? And he replied, 2,000 years ago. And that's a wonderful thing to remember.

Because sometimes our own experience can become dim. Sometimes our own experience can become unreal. Nothing can alter the objective fact that Jesus died, that Jesus rose, that Jesus sent the spirit, and that he will come again.

So, there is a riot of pictures here, of complete transformation. This is the what, if you like. First of all, there's the end of desolation.

Verses 1 and 2, and then verses 6b and 7. This is, if you like, the effect on the created order. This is no thaw.

This is spring. As the white witch's power began to decline in Narnia. And the restored creation begins to emerge here.

[30 : 13] The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. And notice how so often, in the Psalms as well, the created order is seen as rejoicing, as praising. Psalm 148, praise him shining stars, praise him sun and moon, praise him you winds, praise him you heavens and you earth.

The created order praises God. And that's something we need to remember. Be glad and rejoice. Even now, on beautiful days, you can see a glimpse of the wonder of creation.

What creation will be. And the undoing of the curse. Places of, verse 2, the glory of Lebanon.

Lebanon, the place of strength. Majesty of Carmel and Sharon. Strength and beauty will be resolved. Shining in the glory of God.

Remember in Isaiah chapter 6, the great chapter of the call of Isaiah, the seraphim cry, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is filled with his glory.

[31 : 21] That's the eye of faith. One day, we will see it with our own eyes. The earth filled with the glory of the Lord. The waters cover the sea as Habakkuk also looks forward to.

The light of the light that shines and that shows up. Everything. The end of desolation. The created order. No earthquakes. No tsunamis.

No dust bowls. None of the things that make human life so unpredictable. So uncertain. And then there will be full salvation.

In chapter 33, verse 6, I'd use the phrase abundance of salvation. There is a highway to Zion.

The highway shall be there, shall be called the way of holiness. There's no danger of straying. Even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.

[32 : 22] And who will pass along that highway? The redeemed, the ransomed. This is the great Exodus words. Isaiah is envisaging here, as he envisages again in chapter 40, a new Exodus.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. God make his paths straight. And that, of course, includes the transformation of humans.

Verse 5, the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the lame man leap, the tongue of the mute, sing for joy. What's happening in the created universe will also happen in the human, in the human community as well.

Now, these happened when Jesus came. As I say, they were limited. And wonderful things still happen. But full salvation, full wholeness of body and of spirit belong in the future.

And, of course, they also have spiritual meaning. The eyes of the blind shall be opened. The spiritually blind have their eyes opened as the light of the word shines in. Ears of the deaf, those who did not listen and will not listen, and then come to listen because the word of the Lord is powerful.

[33 : 40] The lame man and the tongue of the lame man leap like a deer. People, if you like, finding their way again, standing on their feet, standing tall, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

You see, the devil creates, the devil is so happy when we are lame, blind, dumb, and mute. What does the devil do with people's voices?

Read the miracles in the Gospels. He either makes people dumb or he makes them talk lies. That is the work of the devil. The work of the Lord is so different.

And the highway shall be called the way of holiness. It's on, the verse 8 again, the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall not belong to those, it shall belong to those who walk on the way.

Even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion, nor any ravenous beast. They shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk. You see, this is something that is going to happen.

[34 : 47] It's not a daydream. Isaiah isn't saying, wouldn't it be wonderful if the world were like this? It's not something to try and help us to sing in the wind or so on.

It is the reality of what will happen. And why will it happen? It will happen because the people on their way to Zion are ransomed and redeemed.

Someone has stood in for them. Someone has died for them. Someone has paid the ransom price. You may kill the Redeemer. You may bury him. But he cannot be stopped.

He'll break out of the grave and he'll make his way into the world again. Now, sometimes when we read this, there's this little nagging worry, at least in my mind.

Will it be what it's said to be? Remember, Ariel Stevenson, to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive. You know, sometimes in this earthly life that can happen.

[35 : 50] You look forward to something for so long. You plan it with such care. Then when it comes, a sense of anticlimax, like children on Christmas morning once they've opened their presents and they're bored.

Now, that's not what this will be. Notice the words that are used. Everlasting. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Gladness and joy.

the realities of what will happen. And when this happens, it will not be a tiny number of people, people from earth's wide bounds, from ocean's furthest coast.

It will be people who are traveling the highway to Zion. That's how C.S. Lewis talks about the highway to Zion. You knew this was coming, so I didn't want to disappoint you.

Aslan's friends arrive at the Narnia that is to come and soon they found themselves all walking together and a great bright procession it was toward mountains that are higher than you have ever seen in this world.

[36 : 53] But there was no snow on these mountains. There were forests and green slopes and sweet orchards and flashing waterfalls one above the other going up forever. The land they were walking on grew narrower all the time.

With a deep valley on each side and across that valley the land of Narnia grew nearer and nearer. The light ahead was growing stronger. Lucy saw there's a great series of many colored cliffs led up in front of them like a giant staircase.

Then she forgot everything else because Aslan himself was coming, leaping down from cliff to cliff, a living cataract of power and beauty. And as he spoke, Aslan no longer looked to them like a lion, but the things that began to happen were so great and beautiful I cannot write them.

All their life in this world. Read yourself into this sentence. And all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page.

Now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one at earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

[38 : 12] And I think even Presbyterians can say hallelujah like that. Amen. Let's pray. And from earth's wide bounds, from ocean's furthest coast, through gates of peril, stream in the countless hosts, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Hallelujah. And Father, we pray you will keep us on the highway to Zion. Keep us looking to Jesus until the race is done and the prize is won.

We ask this in his name. Amen.