

ISAIAH

Chapter 35

The Ransomed Shall Return

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; he desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; 2 it 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. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 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." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 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; 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. 8 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.

35:1 *dry land shall be glad.* The personification of nature is common in Isaiah (see 33:9; 44:23; 55:12). (CSB)

The Arabah. The land joins in celebrating God's redemption. Cf Rm 8:19–22. (TLSB)

In the previous chapter we read about sulfur, blazing pitch, thorns, nettles, and brambles. In this chapter we read about blossoms, splendor, bubbling water, and green grass. It is difficult to imagine a sharper contrast. In the previous chapter Isaiah announced the coming judgment; in this chapter the prophet announces the coming deliverance. (PBC)

Thus the field, the meadow, is properly called happy when the year looks its most beautiful. By this picture he also describes the flourishing church, though there is a desert there. The church flourishes inwardly, not in power, in the wisdom of the flesh, in the gleam of splendid works; but it walks along in a simple form, not in ostentatious holiness, and therefore appears to be quite forsaken and without any glitter. Yet there are internal flowers and delights there, but these are not visible, namely, confidence, peace, life, a cheerful conscience, things that are not seen. But it does shine outwardly with obedience, love, humility, etc., which do not seem great in the eyes of the world. (Luther)

wilderness. The Arabah. The desert mentioned here is really the deep cleft on the Jordan valley which runs down through the Dead Sea and on to the Gulf of Aqabah, a very barren and inhospitable region. In other words, the transformation will be as striking as can be. (Leopold)

crocus. This describes how people commonly conceive of the Land of Canaan: desert and wilderness. The southern and southeastern parts of the land, with its arid and semi-arid climate,

for the description. Few springs flow constantly in these regions. When it does rain, the dry and hardened ground cannot absorb the moisture, resulting in a rush of water down the wadi, sometimes with destructive force. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 9, Part 1)

In Israel this is a flower and so was present in the desert and after a rainfall. The Hebrew for this is a lesson in translated rose. (TLSB)

35:2 *rejoice with joy and singing.* Fertile areas renowned for their beautiful trees and foliage. (CSB)

Celebration of creation continues along Israel's coast. (TLSB)

Isaiah contrasts the southern and southeastern with the north and northwestern parts of Palestine: The Carmel mountain range and the agriculturally productive Plain of Sharon, and further north in the forested areas of Lebanon. These regions offer lush and rich growth, remaining green and beautiful even during the summer months. Only God could bring about such climate reversal, demonstrating his great glory and majesty. By initiating the messianic age in his incarnation, Jesus ended the drought of this fallen world and showered all nations with his life-giving forgiveness. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 9, Part 1)

Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon are places noted for their rich fertility and beauty. Lebanon's cedars were highly prized in OT times. Solomon sought them for the temple. Carmel, range of hills, was noted for its thick and luxuriant growth. Sharon, a coastal plain in northern Palestine, was at one time thickly forested with oaks. It was also noted for its dense vegetation and even for its flowers. God will transform the desert, make it bloom, and fill it with the best from these three green places. (PBC)

glory of the Lord – This is the first time Isaiah uses the term “the glory of the Lord.” But it will appear three times in the second half of his prophecy. In Isaiah 40:5, God quotes the voice in the desert proclaiming, “The glory of the Lord will be revealed.” In Isaiah 58:8, the glory of the Lord becomes a rear guard for the His people much as it was for the Israelites in the wilderness. In Isaiah 60:1, God's people are encouraged to arise and shine, for “the glory of the Lord rises upon” them. Isaiah's use of the term in this chapter seems to prepare us for the rest of his prophecy. His prophetic message will soon give way to a historical interlude, and this chapter seems to point us to the following second half of the prophecy. The glory of the Lord and the splendor of our God are sights for the redeemed of God. The glory of the Lord was a cloud that filled the tabernacle at its dedication (1 Kings 8:11). Earlier in the history of Israel, the glory of the Lord led God's people throughout their wanderings in the wilderness. It was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The glory of the Lord is connected with God's saving activity on behalf of His people. (PBC)

Common theme in Is, mentioned 37 times (e.g., 6:3; 60:1; 62:2); denotes His real presence with Israel (cf Ex 40:34–38; 1Ki 8:10–12). (TLSB)

35:3 *strengthen* – This is wonderful comfort that is to be understood not in a physical but in an internal sense, because it shines under the appearance of the cross. For this church of Christ is extremely poor and wretched in appearance, since its poor, distressed, naked, imprisoned, and dishonored are the refuse of all and loathsome to all men for the sake of Christ's name. And the members of the church are exposed to all, to Satan and to the craftiness and power of the world and the flesh. They are like “the offscouring of the world” (1 Cor. 4:13). It is as if people were saying: “They are to be regarded as a misfortune and a monster. If we could only be rid of these

scoundrels.” With all their might they exert themselves to expel and exterminate this utterly loathsome Christian people. So we see today that all the most criminal people are less disturbed than the members of this church. Therefore the inward joy of the spirit fights with the grief of the body exposed to the cross. Therefore the prophet comforts them with exceedingly great consolations. *Strengthen*. This is a command. As long as Satan is awake he will not stop attacking us. It is for us to stand in the battle line against his stratagems. (Luther)

weak hands – This is a picture of people being dragged or driven into slavery. They are worn out by forced marches. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

The feeble hands, unsteady knees and fearful hearts all point to the same problem, that is, man’s fear of the power of the world. Israel, confronted with the might of the world superpowers, could do nothing but tremble and take what she was dealt. Likewise the sinner, confronted by unrighteousness, can only quake, waiting for God’s rightful wrath. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

Weak hands signify lack of courage to go on. It points to men who see no purpose in living. (Leopold)

These shake when one is afraid. As the people prepare to enter this abundant and fertile land, they are commanded to be strong. (TLSB)

The hands that are so weary. Give medicine to those hands so that you become strong again. For Satan has two ways of fighting. He would gladly cast the faithful down suddenly from their joy and faith and into fear and despair. Secondly, he cunningly strives by long lasting torments and by the unremitting pressure of the torments to tire them out. It is as Cyprian confesses: “Satan did not want the captive brothers to be killed in this life, but he preserved them in a long life and distressed them with unremitting aggravation to the point of exhaustion.” These are extremely powerful attacks. Against Satan’s continuous attack we must set our continuous divine help. The devil is a spirit at leisure and thinks of nothing but to take us by storm. We ought not have slack and idle hands over against his deceptions. Have we not experienced in these ten years how he tried by various forces to frighten us away from faith in the Gospel? First through the terrors of the papists, then through the world’s disgrace, then through murdering tyrants, through the fanatics, the schismatics, and fatherly flatteries. The church must diligently oppose his stratagems. (Luther)

35:4 *anxious heart* – In Hebrew: “To those who are hasty and speedy in heart,” who are not steady and firm but want to run away and give Satan the victory. (Luther)

Be strong, fear not. Cf. God’s words of encouragement to Joshua in Jos 1:6–7, 9, 18. (CSB)

Command Isaiah uses elsewhere (8:12; 41:10, 13; 43:1; 51:7; 54:4). (TLSB)

In spite of the aforesaid worries and fears, God’s Word roars in with encouragement and hope. God is greater than the nations or anything that would turn our lives into a desert wilderness haunted by unclean things. Luther: “Though all devils were rolled into one, my God is greater still” (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

In the previous chapter, the nations were invited to listen and pay attention to the revelation of the Lord’s anger. That announcement of judgment brought no comfort. Instead, the graphic, gory description was intended to shock and terrify. It did. Even believers may stand horrified by the

graphic details, but no one ever comforted by the threats of God. So God has a different message for His people: “Be strong, do not fear.” It is the gospel message. How often the Scriptures give us that message. God does not wish to terrify and threaten. Through Christ, sins that deserve fierce punishment from God are forgiven. Through Christ, death becomes a sleep from which He will awaken us. The gospel steadies the weak hands and legs of His children when they have no power to go forward. (PBC)

We ought to strengthen ourselves with these words and say, “Though all devils were rolled into one, my God is still greater.” The afflicted must be comforted with such spiritual consolations of the Word, not with any fleshly comfort which does nothing for troubled consciences but with spiritual comfort and with the living Word of God they must be ruled and strengthened. (Luther)

God is greater than any country and any of our problems, even our hearts as stated in 1 John 3:20 “whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”

Ephesians 6:10 “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”

God will come. Similar language is used of the coming of the Messiah (see 62:11; cf. Rev 22:12). (CSB)

The believer is to take heart because God, Himself, will come! What’s more, His coming will not be quiet but powerful and with authority. Also God’s coming has a specific purpose – “He will come to save you!” To him who says, “He is too far away, I cannot reach him,” the beautiful answer is, “You do not have to reach Him; He comes to you. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

Psalm 27:1 “The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear?”

Isaiah 62:11 “The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: “Say to the Daughter of Zion, ‘See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.’”

Revelation 22:12 “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.”

vengeance ... recompense. Do not avenge yourselves. He is the God of vengeance, He will fittingly requite them and save you. Thus we see that vengeance always comes before they carry out their plan. So Jerusalem, opposing the Word, was stormed by the Romans; then Rome perished. Thus the Spirit comforts us, as if to say, “Remain godly and constant and be lifted up. The Lord will come in time of trial, and He will avenge and save you.” So he comforts the church that is exceedingly hateful to the world and Satan and besides does not shine with outward splendor. On the contrary, it is pressed down by a very heavy cross; it is also beset and harassed by a variety of internal evils, such as weakness of faith and falling into sin. Beyond all these, Satan, the tempter, fights against it. (Luther)

will come and save you – The Lord of glory comes to strengthen and lead them. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

35:5 then – This word sets off the natural result of God’s rescue and restoration. When God intervenes, there is no question about it – blessings will come forth. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

eyes ... ears.† Quoted by Jesus (Mt 11:5). Cf Is 29:18; 30:20–21. (TLSB)

God's salvation mentioned in verse 4 does the healing. When Jesus did miracles of healing he was declaring the presence of the messianic age in himself. While he did not heal everyone while he was on earth the spiritual healing was done in his resurrection and was for all people. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 9, Part 1)

Notice that no freedom from oppression is mentioned here, only the fact that a new era, a new abundant life, is ushered in with God's coming. Certainly, freedom from external oppression is part of God's total promise (cf Is 43:14; 48:20), but aside from the more important divinely given inner restoration, physical freedom can be a curse or a blessing. With God's restoration and deliverance, God's people can and will endure through the many challenges in their lives (Phil. 4:13). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

In that time when the church will flourish in the midst of drought and will be cultivated in the desert, the blind will see plainly, etc. This is taken literally with reference to the miracles of Christ and the church, as we read in the last chapter of Mark (Mark 16:17, 18), signs that were necessary to confirm the new Word, signs that were added to the glory of the church, signs that are not done physically in the last time of the church, now that Christ is no longer weak. They were necessary then as a witness to the Jews, who ought to have recognized the church of God. Allegorically, in the time of the Gospel there were opened (1) *the eyes of the blind*, or ignorant, as we see happening today; (2) *the ears of the deaf*, who now accept the Gospel; (3) *the lame* walking in their own superstitions, as Isaiah calls all idolaters lame, people who walk around in some sect of their own. They limp on one leg. They do not walk in an upright faith. Then, however, when they accept the Word by faith, they walk upright and leap for spiritual joy in Christ. (4) *And the tongue of the dumb sing for joy*, namely, it will glory in a strong confession, and the mercy of the Lord shown to us is proclaimed and boasted; and they will say: "See how God has rescued us from the darkness!" (Luther)

35:6 *lame leap ... tongue of mute.*† Quoted by Jesus to show that he was the Messiah (Mt 11:5). (CSB)

The people of the Bible considered both those who infirm and the desert wilderness to be in the clutches of death – barren and worthless (2 Sam 9:8' Jer 2:6; Jn 9:2). This prophecy had at least partial fulfillment in Jesus' ministry (Mk 7:31-37; Luke 7:22; John 7:37). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

Water ... streams.† Cf. God's provision of water in Ex 17:6; 2Ki 3:15–20. (CSB)

In a land as dry as Israel, water poignantly symbolizes life and salvation (Jer 2:13). New life blossoms where once only dreariness, misery, and death could be found. Note that the water does not simply appear, but it "gushes forth" ("breaks out" KLV, ASV; "burst forth" NKJV). There is no stopping it once it appears. As the life-giving waters flow where they will, so do they renew the dead and barren. Water changes the desert. So does Jesus, the "living water" (Jn 4:10-11), rescue and restore those who have "forsaken" the Lord, the spring of living water" (Jer 17:13) and are entrapped in the wilderness of sin and death. He will lead them to "springs of living water" (Rev 7:17), where perfect eternal peace will reign. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

That is, they are parted and distributed. As a spring flows forth in moistening streams, so this church, which was desert, should gush out in streams of the teachings of the Gospel, always one stream leaping from another into one city and then another, although in the eyes of the world it might seem forever desert. (Luther)

35:7 *burning sand* – Images of a desert mirage might come to mind when considering the various translations of this phrase; “parched ground” (KJV; NKJV); “glowing sand” (ASV). A mirage is nothing but a bitter, disappointing illusion that water is present in the place where it is most needed. The false hope that the world offers to those wandering in the desert of sin is only that – false and fruitless. When examined closely, the civic righteousness of men, the false promises of the world, and the deceitful lies of Satan reveal themselves for what they really are. However, God’s promise is real. Through God’s unbreakable promise to His people, the mirages of our world will fade away and be replaced by a real lake of “living water.” (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

springs. The picture here is the wonderful change that the coming of the Lord would bring. It is a wonderful spiritual transformation. The change in the heart of every believer is such a miraculous transformation. Where there was death because of sin, life springs up by faith in the Messiah – cool, refreshing life, sustained by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. (PBC)

That is, where formerly there was total dryness, there will now be not only streams but also pools and springs. Thus the church will grow in such a way that elsewhere and in other places our streams will become springs. The Word of God will come in abundance. (Luther)

reeds and rushes. Plants that grow in marshes and lakes (cf. 19:6–7). (CSB)

Dragons and serpents like above all to be in dry places, as we see from experience today. As this was formerly a desert, most dreadful in dryness, but now because of the exceeding abundance of moisture has become a place where reeds and rushes grow, so there was nothing but heat, dryness, and ungodliness as long as the Word was absent, but now with the preaching of the Word it is moist and joyful. The serpents and dragons are those who teach ungodly things and with their most pestilential teachings take possession of men’s souls and consciences, whom also Christ calls a brood of vipers (Matt. 23:33). (Luther)

35:8-10 For similar descriptions of the messianic age and its consummation at the end of time, cf 11:6–12; 40:1–11; 41:17–19; 43:14–21; 48:20–21; 65:17–25. (TLSB)

35:8 *highway*. A road built up to make travel easier. (CSB)

One of many images describing the wilderness turning into a garden, bringing the return of the exiles (41:18; 42:15). (TLSB)

The highway enables God’s people to traverse the desert. The desert is a place of death. A whole generation of Israel died there during the 40 years. And every year on the Day of Atonement, a scapegoat carried the sins of Israel out into the desert (Lev. 16:20-22). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 1)

At the time of Isaiah, roads were little more than well-traveled and familiar paths used by almost everyone. (PBC)

This highway shall both ease the way over ravines and difficult places but shall also serve perfectly as a road leading them that use it directly to their destination. (Leopold)

the Way of Holiness.† The way set apart for the redeemed (v. 9). In ancient times, certain roads between temples were open only to those who were ceremonially pure. (CSB)

Language of the exodus from Egypt is another rich source of imagery (cf 11:12, 16; 51:9–10). Jesus told His disciples that He is the way (Jn 14:5–6). (TLSB)

The name of the highway reflects Isaiah’s special name for God – the Holy One of Israel. Holiness is the quality God requires of His people. Not everyone can travel on this road. The unclean cannot travel on this route. It is a route only the holy people of God. Those who travel on the highway are the saints of God, the believers in the Savior. (PBC)

Where formerly there were serpents in the haunts of dragons, that is, pestilential teachers. The Gospel condemns them all. When these have been put to flight, the place will be safe. Indeed, there will be a highway and a royal road, yea, even a holy way. By way of contrast, look at the ungodly, who promise their disciples many things, including a royal highway; but if you look with spiritual eyes, you will see nothing but impassible places and precipices from which they have been hurling down their followers. (Luther)

unclean shall not pass over it – his way is so guarded that it is impossible for an unclean person to walk on it. All other ways put up with the ungodly. No sect can deny this. As the proverb says, “the cowl covers many a rascal.” However, no ungodly person will walk on this way of faith and the Gospel. It will not have the corrupted and unclean walk on it. (Luther)

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shall belong...who walk on the way – That is, this way is such for them in such a manner that no corrupted and ungodly and foreign person walks on it, but *it shall be for them*, that is, it will not be without traffic, but many godly people will be walking on it. It is not to be doubted that these are the hearers and doers of the Word. (Luther)

fools...shall not go stray The Hebrew is unclear. It appears to say, “That even the fools may not go astray there.” They who are regarded as simpletons and fools in the eyes of the world are properly called fools, just as the Word, too, is a word of foolishness. Therefore he says that those who are fools before the world but wise in faith walk on the way. (Luther)

Those new to this path. (TLSB)

35:9 *lion ... beast*. Sometimes wild animals made travel dangerous (see Dt 8:15; Jdg 14:5). (CSB)

Presence of ferocious beasts is a sign of God’s curse (Lev. 26:22). (TLSB)

The Hebrew word לְרֹדְפֵי means highway robbers and thieves, who do not travel on the royal road but on byways. That is to say, this way will be safe, since the lions, that is, the disturbers and teachers of traditions, will not be there, but sincere pastors of the Gospel, who do not permit robbers and butchers that tear us apart with a variety of opinions, but rather guide us on the same unique way. The butchers are the ones who tear us apart with works, persons, places, and numberless works of righteousness. Then we indeed have lions and ravenous beasts on the way.

This unique way of faith, however, gathers me up so that I may not be torn to pieces nor go off on impassible places nor fall into this or that righteousness, but that it may keep me, even me, on the one way, Christ. (Luther)

No dangerous lion or ferocious beast can harm believers on the way of holiness. Faith in the Savior places every believer on the road to heaven, and then God protects every believer on the journey to the heavenly Zion. (PBC)

they will not be found there – That is, they will not be permitted to be found on this way, and to that end the pastors will be alert. What does Paul mean when he says that there are many wicked in the church? I answer: They are among us, but they are not of us. They are the excrement and spittle of the body, not members of the body, the church. Therefore this way will be pure. (Luther)

redeemed.† Those the Lord has delivered from the bondage of sin, prefigured by the deliverance of Israel from foreign slavery (cf. 1:27; 51:10; 62:12). (CSB)

The Hebrew root for redeem refers to fulfilling one’s obligation as a kinsman to defend a relative or to buy him out of death or slavery (Lev. 25:25-28). That God is our Redeemer suggests first that we are involved in a debt we cannot pay, and second, that God is willing to take up the “obligation” to rescue us, an act of great mercy. Jesus, not ashamed to be our kinsman (Heb 2:11), is the redemptive price that brings us forgiveness and rescue from sin and death (Col 1:14). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 9, Part 1)

We have translated “Those who have been set free again will walk there,” that is, in Christian liberty, when the beasts and wolves are warded off by watchful shepherds. Then they will walk safely and securely in freedom, because, redeemed by the Word, they cannot be led astray by laws and traditions, but walk in freedom of conscience. You know that Christian liberty is outwardly subject to all men but inwardly it is lord over all things. It can be condemned by no sin, Satan, Law, etc. Thus it has its being in Christ alone. Meanwhile let the outer man be subject to all, but let not the conscience give in on one title. You will say: “However much I am an unclean sinner, sin, Satan, and Law have nothing against me. All these neither condemn nor confound me. Thus no righteousness, uprightness, etc. will deliver us. Christ alone is our deliverer. This is Christian liberty. (Luther)

35:10 Repeated verbatim in 51:11. (CSB)

ransomed of the Lord – Who are they who walk on this way? None other than *the redeemed of the Lord*. To redeem means to pay the price. For we have been redeemed and purchased at a great price, namely, with the blood of Christ. This is the thunderbolt against all our works. It has a passive significance. It means that we were all sold under sin and death. But we have been purchased by the Lord, and at great cost we are the redeemed of the Lord, not with gold and silver, but with His precious blood. Not with our zeal, not by our works, but we are *the redeemed of the Lord*. (Luther)

Those whom God has rescued in a lasting way, foreseen by the exodus. (TLSB)

come to Zion with singing. As the Israelites did when they returned from Babylonian exile (see Ps 126). (CSB)

They will once again dwell in Jerusalem. Vision points to the eternal city and rest of God's people (Rv 7:9; 21:1–3). (TLSB)

everlasting. Vision points to the eternal city and rest of God's people (Rv 7:9; 21:1–3). (TLSB)

They will spend their time in perpetual and eternal praises, because the Redeemer will also abide forever. Therefore Paul says (Gal. 5:22): "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace" and (Phil. 4:4): "Rejoice in the Lord always." (Luther)

obtain gladness. They will be pursued, not by wild animals (v. 9) but by gladness and joy (cf. Ps 23:6). (CSB)

There will be complete and perfect joy that drives out all sadness. This is an excellent description of the church in this very short chapter, from which many New Testament writers have drawn, namely, that this church is happy and joyful, safe from all stratagems of Satan, that consciences are not burdened with various and divergent traditions, but that it is redeemed of the Lord, redeemed by the blood of Christ, and that it goes on happy and rejoicing in gladness. (Luther)

sorrow ... will flee. Cf. 25:8; 65:19. (CSB)

Ch 35 The Lord prepares the salvation of His exiled people. Today, no matter what foolishness or fear has snared you, confess your sins in the confidence that the Lord has redeemed you by grace alone and has prepared for you a new way of life. • Take my trembling hand, Lord Jesus, and lead me to the comforts of Zion. Amen. (TLSB)