

God's Coming Means Joy Will Overtake Your Sorrow

Isaiah 35:1-10 (NIV)

¹ The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. ³ Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. ⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. ⁹ No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰ and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Last week we heard about John the Baptist in the prime of his ministry. His odd appearance and diet made him a thing to be curious over, but his message was thing that was changing lives. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Matthew 3:2) John was preaching for a turning of their hearts of 180 degrees with actions that reflected the same. Basically, change your life to prepare yourself for God to bring you salvation. John was fulfilling what Isaiah had prophesied, that he was "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" (Matthew 3:3) He also preached a message of judgment, that the ax was at the root of the trees. Those who did not repent, those who did not change and produce fruits in keeping with repentance in anticipation of the coming Messiah will be chopped down. By John's message and baptism he was leading people to the highway of the Lord by completely changing their lives.

John's message of repentance and judgment for unrepentant hearts did not sit well with all his listeners. They didn't want to change their actions. They didn't want to be told they were wrong. Later in his ministry when John was so bold as to tell the leader of the land, Herod the Tetrarch, that he was sinning by taking his brother's wife as his own, Herod used his position to have John imprisoned in a dark, dank dungeon. Herod wanted to kill John for what he was preaching.

John the Baptist had preached unapologetically God's message of repentance and judgment, of proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, a message to prepare the people for Jesus, that they would change their actions in joyful anticipation of their Savior. He preached to prepare that highway in people's hearts by his preaching of God's Word and by the baptism that he offered, and what did he get for it? He got thrown in prison with no hope of parole. That's not how it's supposed to work for people who are doing the right thing. They're not supposed to be punished for doing what is God-pleasing.

You can imagine that John may have started to question his message, his purpose, his very existence. He is supposed to herald the way for the Christ, but preaching that message landed him in jail. How could he go on? Defeat started to set in. His hands went slack as all his strength to carry on started to drain away. In his weakness, he felt as if his body would collapse as he felt utterly defeated in doing good for God. What's the point of continuing to do what God wants him to do? He had pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But here in this dank, dark prison fear started to set in. Would God actually save the world? Would God actually save John?

Have you ever felt like John the Baptist, sitting in prison for doing the right thing, afraid that everything that you have believed in might not actually happen? When I was younger, my mind would sometimes ponder the question, "Is God real? Are the things that I trust in actually going to happen? What happens if I die and I don't go to heaven? Is there a heaven, is there a light, or is there nothing? Will everything that I have hoped in come to nothing?" Does that thought scare you, make you afraid? Do you stay up at night sometimes pondering whether or not God is real? Do these thoughts bleed in to your everyday life, that even though you are faithful to God producing fruit in keeping with repentance, your heart has been changed, you put all this effort into living the way God wants you to, and for what? Your spouse never seems to notice the effort nor do they encourage you. Your kids only demand more and more from you without showing any thankfulness. Your teacher doesn't seem to ever notice how hard you try but is quick to discipline you. Your boss points out only what you do wrong and passes over you for raises. If God wants me to do these good things, why does he make these actions so thankless? Is he actually going to make things better? Is he actually going to save me?

As John was in these moments, he heard about what Jesus had been doing. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3) Are you the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Are you the offspring of the virgin whose origins are from of old, from ancient times? Are you God come to save me?

Jesus sends back this message, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see.” (Matthew 11:4) Then Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” (verses 5-6) The miracles are real. Jesus did them. This is what God foretold as he at the same time promised to come and save us who are afraid that he is never coming, afraid that maybe we won’t be saved. It’s happening. This beautiful picture from Isaiah is being fulfilled. Our God is coming to save us.

Jesus was sending a report to John that the time has indeed come. Things that were not will now be. Deserts will become flush with life and vegetation. Wastelands will have the beautiful forests of Lebanon. The dry and parched land will blossom with crocus, a lily, because water will gush forth there. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In these places sapped of all life, of all hope, burned by the heat of the sun, there green, luscious life will take over.

In that land completely changed from a wasteland to a vibrant forest of life, there will be a highway. That’s where you are going. “It will be called the Way of Holiness.” (verse 8) No enemies will overtake you on that path. You will not even need to fear any wild and ferocious beasts coming after you because they won’t even be allowed on that highway. Only the redeemed will walk there, only the ones the Lord has rescued. This is the path that John prepared for people as he preached repentance and judgment, and so many are walking on it, including us today. We are all headed, to Zion, to the holy place, to heaven. I know that you are depressed, afraid, losing hope thinking that your God will not come to save you. No, he has already come. He is the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. He put you on this highway. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He turned your heart around to repentance. Because of him, you will enter Zion with singing. Instead of fear and depression, everlasting joy will crown your head. Instead of enemies and emptiness overtaking you, gladness and joy will overtake you. Sorrow and sighing will flee away.

This is the picture that God gives us through the prophet Isaiah when we feel like John. All the depressing scenery of our lives that saps our strength of producing fruit in keeping with repentance - the scenery of the unappreciated spouse or parent, of the ignoring of the student’s faithfulness and commitment, the disregarding of hard work – will disappear. The ignored of these fruits that you have done in keeping with repentance are noticed by our Father in heaven and he promises that joy will overtake your sorrow. All the weakness will be driven away and instead you will be strengthened and made firm. All fear and trembling that you have will done away with. He says to us because Jesus has come, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come... he will come to save you.” (verse 4)

You have heard the message that prepares you for the Lord. You have been preached a message of repentance, of turning away from your sins and making a complete 180 to live for God and serve him. God’s Word has put you on this highway described by Isaiah, this Way of Holiness, this path to heaven. God’s Word put you on this because it pointed you to the Lamb of God. This Lamb of God is the Way of Holiness because he has lived holiness for us. He is the one who will make the things that are not, these dry, sapped lands into fertile lands of life. He is the path to Zion, to heaven. Because of him, our lives, as bad as they may get, will be overtaken with joy and gladness.

As another Christmas celebration draws closer, so also does Jesus’ advent. As Jesus’ coming draws closer for us, these pictures of Isaiah draw closer into being a reality for us as we are drawn closer to heaven. So, no matter how dark or depressed or sapping this life can be in living a life of repentance, of living a life in expectation of the Messiah, hear Isaiah’s message, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come... he will come to save you.” (verse 4) We are on the Way of Holiness. We are going up to Zion. We will go up to heaven. Everlasting joy will crown our heads. Gladness and joy will overtake us. Sorrow and sighing will flee away. Keep producing the fruits in keeping with repentance because it’s worth it. Live for God because he will come and save you. God’s coming means that joy will overtake your sorrow. Amen.