

*Streams in the Desert*

Isaiah 34-35

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Last Sunday, we covered Isaiah 33. Isaiah 33 is the center of the book of Isaiah as far as chapters go, but Isaiah 34-35 are the center of the book as far as the message of the book. These two chapters are the heart of God's message given through Isaiah. Old Testament scholar John Goldingay says, "*Chapters 34-35 [are] a double declaration concerning calamity and renewal that looks way beyond this present one.*"<sup>1</sup> In other words, there was a reckoning coming in Isaiah's day, but this reckoning also looked far into the future.

In essence, we are at the middle of the book, and it is as if we have come to a fork in the road in the middle of our journey in Isaiah. There is an old proverb that says, "*When you come to a fork in the road, take it.*" In other words, you have to make a decision. There is no going back.

It is a decision point for those who read the message in our day and age, just as it was for King Hezekiah and the people of Judah's day. We must choose.

Friends, there are only two ways to live in this life. You can live for yourself and your desires and plans and be destroyed in the end, or you can live for Jesus and know the abundant life of His promises.

I'm not saying the abundant life is the easy life. You see, the abundant life is actually a life of taking up your cross daily and following Jesus down the gospel road to Heaven. It is a narrow way that is still filled with struggle and even sorrow. It is the road that leads to eternal life, and as you travel, you are given abundant life.

This narrow way has already been traveled by our Savior. Now He calls us to walk it, and here is the good news. You do not walk alone. Jesus walks this road with us. Jesus is our Savior who has walked this road for us, and now He walks before us, behind us, and with us. He never leaves us or forsakes us. Friends, this is the road you want to be walking on in life.

However, we must beware. There is another road that we will be tempted to walk. It is a wide road. It might seem to be an easier road, but it is a road that leads to destruction. Like the narrow way, the sign above this road says "*Heaven,*" but it actually leads to destruction or to Hell. So, we must choose wisely.

The Lord has taught us some things to help us choose. Here is what we know. First, God is faithful and true. He keeps His promises. He has proven Himself over and over to God's people. He deserves our trust and allegiance. He loves us so much that He came in Christ to pay for our sin against Him. He came to set us free in Him. He came to give us Himself.

Second, here is what we have learned about ourselves. We want to save ourselves. We love self-righteousness. We have more faith in ourselves than we do in God. We struggle to make up our minds and commit to Jesus. We are fearful of taking up our crosses and following Jesus down the road He has already walked for us. We struggle to trust Jesus.

Why do we struggle? It is because the default setting of our hearts is to trust in ourselves and our own plans instead of trusting in Jesus. We treat Jesus as a Savior who is unreliable. We tend to exhaust all of our options until we have to turn to Him as a last resort.<sup>2</sup> Can you identify with what I am saying?

The message of Isaiah is this: *Stop attempting your own means of salvation and trust fully in Jesus alone.*

Now let's zero in on Isaiah 34 & 35. Before we dig into these chapters, you need to understand there is very powerful imagery in these chapters I need to explain in order to create some mental hooks so you will have places to hang this imagery.

Remember, we are at a fork in the road, and we are called to choose. The choice we have to make is between *Edom or Eden*.

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<sup>1</sup> John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Ortlund, *Preaching the Word Series: Isaiah*, 195-196.

What does the imagery of *Edom* mean? Two things: The first one is literal—Edom was about to be judged. Let me give you some background.

*Edom* was a cousin nation to Israel. *Edom* came from Esau. Esau was Jacob's twin brother, who was also called Israel. Jacob and Esau's father was Isaac. You get the picture. Isaac and Jacob were considered patriarchs of the Jewish people. So, the ongoing struggle is between: *Esau=Edom* and *Jacob=Judah/Israel*.

But this is not your typical sibling rivalry. What happened to cause the ongoing struggle was that Jacob stole Esau's birthright and his inheritance when they were youth. So, God's promise was carried on through Jacob and not Esau.

Yet, it was God's plan to carry the promise through Jacob. However, tricking Esau was Jacob's sin. God kept His promise even though Jacob sinned against His brother.

Nevertheless, Esau and his descendants never forgave Jacob. So, when Israel was delivered from Egypt, and they were traveling to the Promise Land, Edom would not allow Israel to pass through their land. Also, when Judah and Israel were judged by God for breaking the covenant with God, Edom rejoiced. Now, in Isaiah 34, we read about the judgment that was coming upon Edom.

Secondly, in Isaiah 34, Edom represents all the nations and peoples of the earth at the final judgment. Edom's destruction represents the destruction of all people who reject salvation in Christ alone.

So, here is the deal: To live for Edom is to live for destruction, or we might call it deconstruction. Deconstruction, or the unmaking of God's good world, is the imagery of what we find God doing in Isaiah 34.

Here is the contrast of the imagery in Isaiah 34. In *Eden*, the Lord brought life out of nothingness or barrenness. In this barrenness, He planted a garden and called it *Eden* and from it flowed streams in the barren desert that watered the earth.

The first people, Adam and Eve, were supposed to tend and care for the garden. If they trusted God and His word, as they tended the garden, the earth would flourish, but if they disobeyed God and lived for their own desires, then all would become corrupt, and life would work in reverse and therefore end in death.

In Isaiah 34, Edom represents all people who have lived for their own desires and purposes instead of trusting God. Now, as a result, the judgment of destruction and we can say deconstruction has come.

Instead of moving toward the ordered abundant life of *Eden*, the great reversal has come. Those who live for Edom and in that way will be destroyed. What should be beautiful streams filled with life-giving water became deserts filled with pitch and burning sulfur. This is a poetic way of describing destruction. Look in Isaiah 34:9:

*Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her soil into sulfur; her land will  
become burning pitch.*

In contrast, those who live for Eden have fixed their eyes on Jesus and live for Him and walk on the narrow road.

To live for Christ is to experience renewal. It is to have Isaiah 35:6 become true for you:

*Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy,  
for water will gush in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*

Or, as Jesus says it in John 7:38:

*Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow  
rivers of living water.'*

Living for Jesus is walking on the road back to Eden. It is living a life that is being saved and put back in order by the Spirit of God.

Walking on this road is living the abundant life. It is a life that flourishes even in the brokenness of this world. It is life that is watered by the Spirit of God and overflows with faith in Jesus. It is the great renewal that comes by the Spirit of God.

So, friends, we are at a fork in the road. There is a choice we must make. There are only two roads to travel and two ways to live *Edom or Eden*. Which do you choose? To walk on Edom's road is death and destruction

but to travel Eden's road is abundant life and life everlasting. These are our two points this morning. So, let's walk through the text.

#### I. Living for Edom ends in destruction (Isaiah 34)

Isaiah 34:1-4 calls all nations to listen to the Lord as He dispenses judgment on the nations. Look in vv. 1-4:

*You nations, come here and listen;  
you peoples, pay attention!  
Let the earth and all that fills it hear,  
the world and all that comes from it.  
<sup>2</sup> The Lord is angry with all the nations,  
furious with all their armies.  
He will set them apart for destruction,  
giving them over to slaughter.  
<sup>3</sup> Their slain will be thrown out,  
and the stench of their corpses will rise;  
the mountains will flow with their blood.  
<sup>4</sup> All the stars in the sky will dissolve.  
The sky will roll up like a scroll,  
and its stars will all wither  
as leaves wither on the vine,  
and foliage on the fig tree.*

Here we find what we might call a doomsday scenario. People have long been fascinated by catastrophes that destroy the earth and wipe out the human race:

- A large meteorite will hit the earth and wipe out all life.
- Destruction of the earth's ozone layer will result in global warming we will all die.
- A super-volcano will erupt, changing the climate to the point where all life on earth suffocates.
- Overpopulation will deplete the earth's resources, and we will all starve.
- Finally, and closer to home, perhaps an air-borne super virus will wipe out the human race.<sup>3</sup>

These are pretty common themes in books and movies. People love them and gravitate to them.

However, there are no books or movies that will ever surpass the end-time scenario that God has written in His word. The fact is, eventually, all sinners will be judged, and those who have rejected Jesus will receive the full weight of God's wrath.

Verses 1-4 give us a taste of the judgment that is to come. The truth is, no one likes to hear preaching on judgment. And the fact is, any preacher worth his salt does not necessarily enjoy preaching on it. I have suspicions about any preacher who enjoys preaching on Hell and God's wrath against sinners. Preaching on judgment is difficult preaching.

I know I don't enjoy it, but it must be done because people must be warned. The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian philosopher Francis Schaffer used to say that if he had only one hour to explain the gospel to someone that he would spend fifty minutes on the bad news of the coming judgment and then the last ten minutes on the good news of the gospel. If we don't understand the bad news of God's judgment and wrath, then we will not appreciate or even understand salvation because we will not have any context for appreciating it.<sup>4</sup>

So, what must we do? We must learn to fear the right things. Because we are born broken by sin, we fear the wrong things. These wrong fears become what I call "*functional hells*" that we avoid at all costs. We fear looking foolish in public. We fear failure. We fear not having the perfect family/perfect kids. We fear being left out.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Davis, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Isaiah*, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Ortlund Jr., *Preaching the Word Series: Isaiah*, 198.

We fear not being liked by someone we value. We fear, we fear; we fear until all we focus on are these fears until we are consumed by anxiety. Then what we do is work to avoid being trapped in the “functional hells” in our lives.

However, Jesus calls us to have our fears put in the right place when He says in Matthew 10:28:

*Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*

Jesus calls us to have our fears put in their right place and to fear God above all other things in our lives. When we fear Him rightly, then all other fears become prayer requests that drive us into the arms of Jesus.

So, let's put our fears in the proper perspective as we work through Isaiah 34. Isaiah has been reminding us that it is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of the Living God who is a Consuming Fire.

Isaiah 34 gives us means of judgment for those who walk in the way of Edom: *His rage, a sword, a sacrifice, and a day of vengeance.*

Verses 2-4 tell us that the *rage of God* will explode upon the world, and those who are not prepared will suffer the wrath of God. Look in v. 2:

*The Lord is angry with all the nations,  
furious with all their armies.  
He will set them apart for destruction,  
giving them over to slaughter.*

God's wrath has been mounting since the beginning, and now it will burst forth like the breaking of a dam, and blood will flow as high as the mountains.

Next, in v. 6, we find two more means of judgment. *The Lord has a sword and a sacrifice.* Look in v. 6:

*The Lord's sword is covered with blood.  
It drips 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.*

Taken together, this imagery is that of the *sword of the Lord* that is carrying out His *sacrifice*.

Think about it this way. There will be a *sacrifice* for sin, and it will be carried out by the *sword* of the Lord. The *sword and sacrifice* represent the wrath of God on sin and sinners.

Bottom line: There will be a sacrifice. The scales of justice will be balanced. The question is will you pay for your own sins under the sword of the Lord as an eternal sacrifice, or will Jesus Christ be your substitute who was sacrificed for you by bearing the sword of the wrath of God for you on the cross?

This leads us to our last image that puts our fears in the proper perspective—the *day of vengeance*. The *day of vengeance* sounds really harsh to our modern ears. However, it had more of a positive connotation in Isaiah's day. *The day of vengeance* in Isaiah's had to do with *lawfulness and justice*. It was the balancing of the scales and setting all things right.<sup>5</sup>

Do you know what this means? It means that nothing will be overlooked, and everything will be fulfilled. Justice will be done according to God's Holy Law. This is the imagery of the judgment of those who walk in the way of Edom.

Then Isaiah goes through a long list of things in vv. 10-15 that describe in detail the destruction of Edom and the nations who lived in unbelief in Jesus.

After that, God puts an exclamation point on Isaiah's prophecy with vv. 16-17:

*Search and read the scroll of the Lord:  
Not one of them will be missing,*

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<sup>5</sup> Allan Harman, *Focus on the Bible: Isaiah: A Covenant to be Kept for the Sake of the Church*, 256.

*none will be lacking its mate,  
because he has ordered it by my mouth,  
and he will gather them by his Spirit.  
<sup>17</sup> He has cast the lot for them;  
his hand allotted their portion with a measuring line.  
They will possess it forever;  
they will dwell in it from generation to generation.*

Bottom line: Not one detail will be omitted. Every line will be fulfilled, even up to the ones that deal with the *sand partridges, ostriches, hyenas, wild goats, and birds of prey and their eggs*. Everything will be done.

This is the full and final destruction that is to come for you if you live for Edom. The good news is, there are streams in the desert of your life and in their world for you if you will but turn to Jesus. Now, let's look in Isaiah 35 for the good news.

## II. Living for Eden results in salvation (Isaiah 35)

Isaiah 35 is a short but beautiful chapter. It takes the imagery of the destruction of *Edom* and reverses it. Now the imagery is of streams flowing into the dry land, and the desert rejoices. It begins to bloom abundantly with blossoms of wildflowers. Eden is remade. There is a new Garden, and it is in your life.

The imagery is of the abundant life that the Spirit of God gives to those who trust in Jesus. The desert of our lives is watered by the Spirit of God through the ministry of the gospel so that our lives are filled with rivers of Living water.

Now, we learn four facts about those who walk in Eden's way or, as v. 8 says, the *Holy Way*. First, *Jesus saves the weak and fearful*. Look in vv. 3-7:

<sup>3</sup> *Strengthen the weak hands,  
steady the shaking knees!  
<sup>4</sup> Say to the cowardly:  
"Be strong; do not fear!  
Here is your God; vengeance is coming.  
God's retribution is coming; he will save you."*

We can't save ourselves. We are weak and helpless. So, God sent His Son to do the work for us. He saves us and strengthens weak hands and shaky knees. He says to us, "*Be strong; do not fear!*" Why? Because God has brought vengeance. It is lawfulness and justice. Jesus fulfilled the law and gave justice to the poor. We are the poor who need Jesus' justice. We need His fulfilling the Law for us.

Next, look in vv. 5-7, and we see the second fact: Renewal.

<sup>5</sup> *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
<sup>6</sup> Then the lame will leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy,  
for water will gush in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
<sup>7</sup> the parched ground will become a pool,  
and the thirsty land, springs.  
In the haunt of jackals, in their lairs,  
there will be grass, reeds, and papyrus.*

Those who walk in the way of Eden have been renewed and redeemed by Jesus. Through Jesus, the curse of sin is removed, and the blessing of Eden comes into the heart and life of that new child of God.

Now those who were formally considered unclean are made holy and can walk in the Way of Holiness, as we will see in v. 8. The *spiritual eyes* of the blind are opened, *the spiritually deaf* can hear, and the *spiritually lame* can walk in the way, and *the spiritually mute* can now sing the praises of the King.

These are all miracles that Jesus performed during His life and ministry to show He was the Savior. The good news is that He is still opening the spiritual eyes, ears, and mute today. He is still *strengthening the legs of lame*. He is still setting people on the way of Holiness today.

Bottom line: The streams of the water of life are gushing forth into the desert of our lives, saving us and transforming us, as we see in v. 8.

Look at the third fact in v. 8: *Salvation results in transformation:*

*A road will be there and a way;  
it will be called the Holy Way.  
The unclean will not travel on it,  
but it will be for the one who walks the path.  
Fools will not wander on it.*

Verses 9-10 tell us that those who walk that road are the *redeemed* and the *ransomed*. They walk on the *Way of Holiness*.

By the way, these are the ones who were blind, deaf, lame, and mute. Now, they are redeemed and ransomed by the precious blood of Jesus. Now, they do not walk in the way of Edom. Now, they walk in the *Way of Holiness*.

The fourth fact about walking in the way of Eden or the Holy Way is that the redeemed will never lose their way. Their salvation is guarded by the Lord God Himself. He will keep them on the path of righteousness.

There will be no predators that can steal or kill God's pilgrims, for they possess eternal life, not temporary life. The Lord God will bring His people into Zion, which is the New Eden. They will come in with singing and unending joy.

There will be no more sorrow, no more sadness, and no more sickness, for everything will be made new in the presence and glory of Jesus. There will be full and complete healing. The hard of hearing will be able to hear. Those who struggle with their emotions will be at peace. There will be no more heart attacks and strokes. No more cancer. And best of all—sin will be no more. Jesus will wipe away every tear from the eyes of His beloved children, for He will have borne away their sadness and sorrow. This is what it means to live for Eden and live in the New Eden. Isn't that the road you want to travel?

So, you are at the fork in the road. You are at the decision point. Will you go the way of Edom or the way of Eden? There are only two destinations. Where are you headed?