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# Isaiah Series 1

## Lesson 8

### “Isaiah 35:1-10”

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**Objective** - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

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**Materials** - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

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**Procedures**

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

<sup>1</sup> Let the wilderness and the dry region rejoice, let the desert plain (*Arabah*) rejoice and blossom like a meadow of saffron. <sup>2</sup> It will blossom abundantly and furthermore, rejoicing it will shout for joy. The glory of the Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of Yahweh, the splendor of our God. <sup>3</sup> Make strong the weak hands and the stumbling knees make stout. <sup>4</sup> Say to those that are quick of heart, be strong, do not be afraid, behold your God. He will come with vengeance and recompense; God, he comes to help you. <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be opened. <sup>6</sup> Then the lame shall leap as a deer, and the tongue of the speechless will shout for joy in the wilderness, torrents waters in the desert plain (*Arabah*); <sup>7</sup> and the parched ground will become a reedy pool and the thirsty ground a spring of waters, in the abode of the jackal is her resting place, a haunt for reeds and papyrus. <sup>8</sup> And there will become a highway and a way, it will be called a way of holiness; the unclean will not pass on it; the ones traveling on the way the foolish will not get lost on it. <sup>9</sup> No lion will be there, or vicious beast cannot come upon it, and the redeemed will walk there. <sup>10</sup> The redeemed

**of Yahweh will return and come to Zion with joyful shouting and  
and exceeding everlasting joy will be upon their heads, gladness  
and exceeding joy will be caused to overtake and grief and groaning  
will flee.**

In chapter 34 it seems that Yahweh would nullify every threat that might affect the world of Jerusalem. Yahweh would come with great vengeful wrath to vindicate Zion (34:8). Basically God cleared the ground in chapter 34 and now we turn in chapter 35 to the positive content of what Yahweh will do for Zion. This chapter contains a lyrical anticipation of time to come that will restore creation to well-being (verses 1-2, 6-7), the faithful will be healed (verses 3-4), and they will be brought home safely and joyously (verses 8-10).<sup>1</sup> Chapter 34 seems to us harsh and unyielding because of the devastating blows delivered by Yahweh. As we come to chapter 35 there is still a rigid, powerful resolve seen in the actions of Yahweh. For Isaiah, Yahweh is not soft and cuddly, not someone to sing songs to as if he is my best friend or my boyfriend. He is the Lord of Hosts, someone to make the heart tremble and the earth shake.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 274-275.

Yahweh is awe inspiring, someone to be feared, respected and not someone to be taken for granted. The Yahweh portrayed in Isaiah sweeps the ground clean not with a gentle broom, but he clears it with an axe and with fire. This is slash and burn for anything and anyone that stands opposed to Yahweh, his people, and his will. Yahweh brings vengeance as a consequence of the injustice done by those that oppose his people and in the arrogance of such opposition defy God himself. Such arrogance will not be allowed to continue forever. The comfort of the prophecies of Isaiah come in the message that the action of Yahweh has begun. Not all of the details of those actions are given. For us there is far too little that tells how it will affect me as an individual. Such a perspective would be seen by Isaiah and the people of his time as insubordinately arrogant in the extreme. We have no right to question God as if he has been summoned before us as his judge and jury. Such a reading of Isaiah would be beyond imagining for Isaiah and his audience. Yahweh the storm God, the creator, the enforcer, cannot be expected to be subject to any such scrutiny.


Isaiah indicates to his audience that Yahweh has begun to act in chapter 34 and here in chapter 35 we are given further details regarding what will be the ultimate outcome of those initial moves made by Yahweh. These oracles stand both as a warning and a great comfort to those who are Yahweh's people. Those who remain in covenant relationship with him can expect great blessings, great mercy, and a great future. For those who stand as the enemies of Yahweh there will be great calamity, great pain, and no future. The effect of Yahweh's judgment is felt most immediately by those who are living nearest to the borders south and east. This location is referred to using 3 nouns, "the wilderness," "the dry land," and "Arabah." These three names refer to the rift of the Jordan, especially south of the Dead Sea toward the Gulf of Aqabah. This eastern part of the Negev was territory that stood under dispute between Edom and Judah during the entire period of their existence. Although this territory seems barren and foreboding to the eyes of some, it is a place that drew shepherds and farmers who hoped for rains that seldom came. When they did come however, the land proved to be incredibly fertile and fruitful. The land was especially

fruitful if only the rains would come, and the position of this land was strategically located to control the trade routes to the Gulf of Aqabah and to Arabia.<sup>2</sup>



The vision of well-being begins with the large vista of creation and anticipates that there is going to be a major change in the realm of creation. The rhetoric here is organized in a before and after scenario. The before is voiced in the triad, in terms of wilderness-dry land-desert. There is a sense in which these terms reflect an

<sup>2</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 25, Revised Edition (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), pp. 539-540.



intensely arid climate, but the theological point being made here is that the creator's intent of full fruitfulness has not been implemented. The intensity of Yahweh's creative activity is about to be ratcheted up and the triad of death will now be answered with a triad of life and fertility: Lebanon-Carmel-Sharon. The poet uses the imagery of the most fruitful and richest areas of agriculture to exhibit the full and great ability of creation. The land, because of what Yahweh has done, will break out into a bountiful fruitfulness; so much so that the land will break out in song and rejoicing. The good news (gospel) announcement made here is that infertile, arid, dry land will become fertile, humid and wet because of the power of Yahweh.<sup>3</sup>


The practical outcome here may be that the land receives rain that reinvigorates creation, but the theological claim is that such a restoration exhibits the significance of the touch of Yahweh and the result of his power. By demonstrating the rehabilitation of creation Yahweh has provided evidence that his authority is being resumed and it is being made absolutely clear who is in charge.<sup>4</sup> In a way that is perhaps reminiscent of the challenge that Edom continually made

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 275.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 275.





to Jacob, others have challenged Yahweh. In demonstrating that Yahweh's decree regarding the primacy of Jacob stands firm he also makes it clear that he is indeed sovereign, he is indeed God, there are no challengers, only usurpers who should now quake because Yahweh is moving.

The second group to be affected by the change of circumstances initiated and completed by Yahweh are the pilgrims who are in transit to Zion. In the past they will have had to pass through territory around Jerusalem that was controlled by those who were foreigners. The travel in such circumstances was unpleasant and at times dangerous for those pilgrims. Such pilgrimage processions will certainly have contained those who were infirm, the ill, and those with disabilities. The goal of such pilgrimages was to see the Holy City. In many ways this list also includes those who have been blinded, been made deaf, and been made unable to understand by Yahweh's own decree. Yahweh opens their eyes, their ears and their hearts to the reality of who he is and the message that he has for them.<sup>5</sup> The message here is more than just about physical

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<sup>5</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, pp. 540-541.

healing, this is a healing of the soul so that things which were hidden before now are opened up and something greater than healing of the body occurs, Yahweh has healed the soul.

Those who have weak hands and enfeebled limbs are not unlike wilderness-dryland-desert. They too are unable to fulfill the function for which they were created. The before picture is of a people with weak hands and feeble knees; the after picture is one of strength and well-being. This same theme is picked up in Hebrews 12:12-13 with the giving of an imperative to be healed. The turning point for those that are disabled is Isaiah 35:4a, which is the gospel announcement, the assertion of the newness that is radiating forth from Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> “Be strong, do not fear.” This is an oracle of salvation the assurance that things are changing; they are in flux, moving from what they were to what they will become. The grounds for such confidence is based in one thing and one thing only and is announced with the words, “Behold your God.” Yahweh had been absent from the Jews in their weakness, as God was absent from the creation that was arid and dry. Now God is present, active, available and decisive.

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. NRSV

Everything good that is to come depends upon this fact, God has arrived and is exerting his sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>

The problem of weak and feeble knees has its remedy in the actualization of God. God is announced, made visible, and will come; with his coming will arrive the insurgent power of Yahweh to reverse all the disabilities brought about during the time of unfaithfulness. God will come to right the wrongs and to wreak vengeance upon anything that opposes the rule and sovereignty of God.<sup>8</sup> We are not talking here about arid and dry creation, but about feeble and weak humans who need salvation. With the restoration of right circumstances comes the restoration of the honor of Yahweh. The rehabilitation of God's people and his honor are inseparable. The

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 276.

<sup>8 35</sup> **Vengeance is mine, and recompense,  
for the time when their foot shall slip;  
because the day of their calamity is at hand,  
their doom comes swiftly.**

<sup>36</sup> **Indeed the Lord will vindicate his people,  
have compassion on his servants,  
when he sees that their power is gone,  
neither bond nor free remaining.** NRSV Deuteronomy 32:35-36.

**O Lord, you God of vengeance,  
you God of vengeance, shine forth!**

<sup>2</sup> **Rise up, O judge of the earth;  
give to the proud what they deserve!** NRSV Psalm 94:1-2.



power of death and dysfunction will be shattered.<sup>9</sup> The curse of blindness and deafness will be lifted along with the other infirmities that have come and the children of God will leap not like a healthy human, but like a deer. Water will flow where once there was desert and drought. The places that were hot, parched and cursed will be cooled and nourished with life from the source of life, Yahweh.


Those places that were unclean and haunted places will become watered, fruitful and full of life where once death and barrenness had been the norm. Again and again it is important to recognize the dual edge infuse these words, they are not simply talking about the physical, but also about the soul. The physical world is a reflection of the spiritual and just as we can clearly see the sickness and death of the physical world this should alert us to a reflection of the reality of the spiritual realm, the realm of the soul. The healing of Yahweh is a total healing, a healing that runs deep and wide leaving no stone of death and decay remaining. The words that are in the chapters 34 and 35 will act as a transition to the chapters

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 276-277.

of Isaiah that will follow and the themes and concepts that are laid out here will be repeated and expanded in the chapters that follow.


The imagery of pilgrimage continues in verse 8 as the people will have remembered what it was like before to pass from their homes outside Jerusalem to the Holy city that was controlled by foreigners. The journey was one that was fraught with sadness, longing and dangers. At verse 8 we see that a highway has been opened up by God, a way that shall be called holy. Those that are unclean will not travel on this way it will be free from the riffraff and those that are not the people of God. This will be a highway reserved for the faithful, the redeemed, the people of God. It will not only be a safe place but also a way that is easy to follow and not even fools will be able to get lost on this highway. Surely all of us have paid the fool at some point and so this brings some comfort. On this highway there is no need to be afraid of the wild beasts such as a lion, because they are not allowed on this highway, nor any other ravenous beast that might put the faithful in danger as they travel. The beasts know their creator and obey him as master. This is the



highway of the redeemed and they are redeemed not through their own power and wisdom, but through the hand and power of Yahweh.

The people who travel this road are not only redeemed they are ransomed. Yahweh has bought their release from the dominion and power of sin, death, and weakness. All that is accomplished here is accomplished through the power and sovereignty of Yahweh and the safety of this traveling band is also guaranteed by Yahweh. They come to Zion recognizing this and they come with the joy of this knowledge lifted onto the wind as they sing. Their hearts shall be filled with joy and any sorrow, or remnants of suffering will be washed away in the barrage of joy created in the wake of God's return to Zion in power and sovereignty. Israel belongs to Yahweh, and Yahweh is their God, the two are united in covenant through the mighty hand of God himself. No threat will engender fear, doubt, or danger ever again. All that threatens will flee the presence of God.

Here in Isaiah we have an oracle of the Gospel, the good news. Emmanuel, "God with us," is the great hope portrayed by the prophet. The Gospel writers will recognize in the words of this ancient Hebrew poetry the promise of God coming in power to



rescue his people. This same theme is repeated over and over again in Scripture to generation after generation. The theme over and over again is that the solution to the problems confronting mankind will all be repaired with the presence of God.

# Synopsis

Chapter 35 comes to us after the harsh treatment of those opposed to God in chapter 34. Here we have the revelation of the consequences of what Yahweh's actions now open up. The earth knows the touch of its creator and responds to his coming with fruitfulness, rejoicing and fertility. This is what happens when God comes near. Not only does the land respond, but the people respond too, and the changes are apparent and immediate. The weakness of human frailty is replaced with strength flowing from its source. Fear is replaced with a recognition of the certainty of God's intervention against anything and everything that might create fear. Yahweh will avenge the injustices and wrongs that have come. The blind, those who have been unable to see the hand of God at work, and see the message in his words, will now see. The deaf will now hear and comprehend the words of God. The power of God will cause human beings to leap like deer. As the desert was transformed so now humanity is transformed and blossoms and blooms.



The scene turns to pilgrimage and this is perhaps something that we are not as familiar with as we should be. There was great strength and courage found in the people of God traveling to Jerusalem to worship. Though things have changed in so many ways for us the imagery should open up to us the power of a highway filled with pilgrims traveling to worship Yahweh. In the past such journeys were often more sombre affairs because the pilgrims had to pass through enemy territory, dangerous territory, difficult territory. Now things are changed, there is a new superhighway that is solid, smooth, safe and no longer surrounded by enemies. This is a highway that is well marked and clear so that even the stupid can find their way on it. It is a highway reserved for those on a pilgrimage to Yahweh, to Zion, and no others may travel on this highway. Not lions, or dangerous animals will travel on it. Yahweh is their master too. Those who have been purchased (ransomed) will travel on it and this will be a highway of joy, celebration and jubilation. This is the highway of the Lord. This imagery will act as a powerful encouragement to the people of God through the centuries and will be picked up by the church as they would call themselves “the way.”

# Questions

1. Why do you think the imagery of a desert blooming is used here by the oracle?
2. How does land rejoice?
3. What does it mean to see the splendor of Yahweh?
4. How do you think fear might be removed by the presence of God?
5. How do you think weakness relates to the absence of God?
6. What is the way of holiness?
7. How are we to travel the way of holiness today?
8. Have you ever been attacked because of your faith? What were the circumstances ,and if not why do you think you have not been attacked?
9. What are some ways that people show that they are rejoicing before God?
10. How do you think the nearness of God should affect your soul?
11. What is your soul?
12. How is God a part of your soul?
13. How does the vengeance of God differ from the vengeance of men?
14. Do you long for God to come and make things right? What do you think that will look like for you when he does?
15. Are you on a pilgrimage now? Why, or why not?