

Isaiah 34:1-35:14

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[0 : 00] I took the one less travelled by.

! Has made all the difference. Life often involves the choosing of two paths. Two ways. Two roads. And in some cases in our lives, we look back and when there's been that choice between two paths, two ways, two roads, that choice has made all the difference. And here in Isaiah chapter 34 and 35, two roads are presented to you. I'll change the image a little bit from the Robert Cross poem. There is a road that we are already on as human beings, or have been on, and that road is the default road in life.

[1 : 18] It's the road that you are on this morning, unless you've chosen to get off it. And then there is the road on which you have to consciously choose to travel on, if you're ever going to get on to it. You never stumble onto this road or sleepwalk onto it. You never just stray onto it. You never just find yourself on that second road. And the two roads are conveniently presented to us in these two chapters.

The default road is chapter 34, and the road that you have to choose to go on is chapter 35. And in terms of eternity, Isaiah shows us that whatever road you take, whether it's Isaiah 34 or Isaiah 35, makes all the difference.

Because the prophet takes you and I by the hands this morning, all the way to the brink of future history, where time merges with eternity. And he shows us the seamless connection between what you embrace now in your life, and what you will have then.

And which road you take in this life makes all the difference. And so I want us to see that these roads point to a destination that is here, and a destination that is there.

[2 : 33] And it's going to invite to you, well, choose which road you're on this morning. So chapter 34, as you saw me, as you and me read it, is a chapter of judgment. It's a road to judgment. Chapter 35 is the road to salvation.

And to avoid the road to judgment, you have to choose the road of his salvation. Chapter 34, I don't know whether you picked it up, is an incredibly heavy chapter. It is one of uninterrupted judgment. I confess that as I was working through this chapter, at times I felt nauseous. I felt sick as I went through it. Look with me at verses 1 to 3. Draw near, O nations, all the world, to hear, and give attention, O people of the world.

Let the earth hear. It wants you to listen up this morning, wherever you're from, and all that fills the world and all that comes from it. Verse 2, for the Lord is enraged against the nations.

He's furious against their host. He's devoted them to destruction. He's given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out. The stench of the corpses shall rise.

[3 : 38] Rotting bodies, the mountains shall flow with their blood. God has angered every nation. God has angered everyone who has not trusted in him.

Everyone who has opposed his people and his patience here has reached its end. God is more patient than you and I can ever fathom. He's more patient than you or I ever would be.

And yet here we see the patience of God is not infinite. God's patience has an end. And judgment is the natural outworking of God being a king. Now do you remember in chapter 33, last week we saw, because he is a king, he has to rule.

And because he rules, he judges. And that means the rebellion at some point must finally be put down. And here in chapter 34 the moment has come.

And it's absolutely gruesome. And you need to feel the heaviness. If you don't feel the heaviness of this chapter you're not understanding what Isaiah is saying. Because divine judgment in this chapter is not theological abstraction that's somewhere out there.

[4 : 46] It's not something for academics or the intelligentsia to debate, whether it's true or not. It's slaughter. It's stench. It's blood.

You might say, well it's just imagery. Well if it's imagery, it's imagining something that is worse than the image. Christians often say, God hates the sin but loves the sinner.

And yet that's fine for this world. But what we see is at the end of time that breaks down, doesn't it? Because can you see at the end of this default road, at the destination of destruction in chapter 34, the sinner and the sin become inseparable.

And there's no place left for love. The judgment here is not just of the sin, but of the sinner. And through the rest of the chapter there's absolutely no respite.

This God is going to judge us. We're told four things. We're told in verse 2 that he is enraged. He is raging against the nations. We're told in verses 5 to 6 that he has a sword that is bathed in blood.

[6 : 08] In verse 6 we are told that he has a sacrifice prepared. There is a sacrifice prepared for those who have rejected him. And verse 8, there is a day of vengeance on behalf of those who belong to him.

And you get to verses 9 and 10 and there is smoke. There is smoke rising from the ruins in Eden. It's the language of Genesis chapter 11 and Sodom and Gomorrah.

But do you notice, Eden here is not just one day. Shouldn't you remember verse 1? It's all the nations. And that represents all the enemies of God's people. So that now the fire and the brimstone of Genesis 11 is global.

And everything is coming apart. And one of the most chilling aspects of this scene is in verse 11. So can you see in verse 11, I just want you to look at the footnote.

It says in verse 11, for the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it. The owl and the raven shall dwell. That's how desolate it is. And he shall stretch the line of confusion over it.

[7 : 11] And the plumb line of emptiness. And so in verse 11 there is this confusion. There is this emptiness. None of it is haphazard.

This is not God throwing up his arms in the air and saying, well to hell with the world. It's not like that. There's precision here. God will unmake his world.

The rebellious culture in which we now live in. There is precision. God is going to be absolutely just. There will be nothing unfair. It's going to be painfully just.

And so the picture is there, isn't it, in verse 11, of God as a construction worker. More accurately, God is as a destruction worker. God has got his hard hat on.

And he's bending over the society of men and women. Who are constructing or putting together a world without any reference to him. But instead of building up further, God reverses it to nothingness.

[8 : 14] Do you see those words in verse 11? If you look at the footnote in verse 11, the confusion can also mean formlessness. The footnote. That's very important. There is chaos, isn't there?

There's confusion. And there is formlessness. And there is emptiness. Now why is that important? That's important because in Genesis chapter 1 and verse 2, it says the earth will be without form and void.

It will be formless and empty. Genesis chapter 1 verse 2. And you see, Isaiah wants you and I to pick up on that. That God one day is going to hit the rewind button on creation.

He's going to reverse into disorder the system that has so long been disordered the good order. God is going to destroy it with precision. And he will overlook nothing.

And through all of this, Isaiah looks you and I in the eye and reads our mind. And he says to you and I, don't think God will change his mind on this one. Don't think that God is going to lose his nerve.

[9 : 23] Don't think there's a plan B. You need to understand that God has his judgment planned down to the finest minute detail. And if that doesn't send a chill through you, I don't know what will.

This is the destination, Isaiah says, of the default road that every one of us is on unless we consciously get off it. Because every one of us, the Bible says, are rebels against God.

Every one of us wants to do things our own way. And this is the end point. This is the end point for all of us who are just left to ourselves.

Here's how Roy Ortland puts our predicament. He says, what if God leaves you to yourself? What if God does not intervene to save you? And Isaiah 34 is your final chapter.

What if that itching envy in your heart, that bitterness eating away inside you, that anger raging inside you, your ungrateful self for whom nothing is ever good enough?

[10:28] The you lurking in the fantasy twilight of lust. The you buried alive in the coffin of grief. The you that is too sophisticated for childlike delight in God.

What if God does not save you? The you that you are becoming now is what you will be forever unless God saves you. You will eventually find that you cannot stop anymore.

And the grumbling and the blaming and all the rest will take over and churn on forever like a machine. And you won't be able to stop and rest. That hell, when you become the photographic negative of what you were meant to be when God made you.

That's the road of judgment. That's the default road. Francis Schaeffer, who really founded our little denomination, used to say that if he had one hour to explain the gospel to someone, he would spend the first 50 minutes on the bad news of judgment.

And the last 10 minutes on the good news of salvation. Because without a context of judgment, you and I don't appreciate salvation. And we are a city where the vast majority of churches have stopped preaching about judgment.

[11:46] But we have not spent 50 minutes on chapter 34. But I hope the time we have spent on it makes you see how unbelievably and incredibly good and great the news is of chapter 35.

That's second issue, the road to salvation. Look at chapter 35 verses 1 and 2. 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 and sin. 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. And right away it's as if you don't have time to catch your breath. After the awfulness of chapter 34. The beam of light comes shooting through the realm of darkness. And right away, right away there's talk of gladness, isn't there? And new life and joy.

[12:48] In fact the joy and the rejoicing are repeated. Three times the word that's translated kind of bursts into it. It's joy. The wilderness will be joyful.

The dry land will be joyful. The crocus will be joyful. Verse 2. It'll blossom with joy. Isaiah is trying as hard as he can to use words.

For you and I to see the contrast. The wilderness. The desert. Joy. Gladness. You'd never put those three things together. But here they are.

See, see the echoes of Exodus. In verse 6 he talks about waters breaking forth in the wilderness. And streams in the desert. So he's picking up on the scenes of the life of Moses.

But what you have in chapter 35 is much bigger than the book of Exodus. Because here is a world that is transformed. Here is a world where the curse of the fall that you and I live under has been completely reversed.

[13:52] And where everything is restored. And so there is a new world. And everything, everything, everything is flowing with life.

And it's brimming with vitality. But Isaiah says. It's not even the beauty of creation. It's not going to be the beauty of creation.

And flowers and all those wonderful things. That is the ultimate joy. Because the great beauty and splendour of the creator himself. He is to focus that. It's not just the world around us that's going to be transformed.

As wonderful as that will be. It's you and I will be transformed. Those who are in Christ. Chapter 5 and 6. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened. The ears of the deaf will be unstopped. And then shall the lame man leap like a deer.

And the ten of the moots sing for joy. Isaiah says, doesn't it? In this future world. And ability will replace disability.

[14:55] The present weaknesses. The things that ache. And make life so difficult at times. All of them will be gone. All the physical weaknesses that are so discouraging.

And what is now only a dream. One day you and I will actually experience. I know that some of you go through incredible physical pain.

Day in. And day out. And it seems to you doesn't it? Like a dream. That you could ever be free from it. That you could ever have a body that does not ache.

But Isaiah says there is a day. There is a day coming. And note the physicalness. Of Isaiah 34.

It's not that we are just going to be mere spirits. We are not going to be. Kind of.

[15:56] Spiritual beings floating around. We are going to have eyes. And ears. And legs. To leap on. And tongues to shout. Because we will have bodies.

And God is going to redeem our bodies. Because this future world that God is creating. Is not less physical.

Than the world that we live in now. But it's more physical. And all disability. Will be replaced by ability. I have heard this sermon on Monday.

Before the news of Betty Simpson's death. Those of you who don't. Betty was in a wheelchair certainly for the last. Kind of ten years of her life. And on Monday morning. I read of Johnny Erickson Tarder.

Johnny Erickson Tarder is a hero of mine. She is now in her late 60s. But she was in a diving accident. Back in 1967. Which left her paralyzed. From the neck down. And since that point.

[16:59] She has made. Well she has written some remarkable books. She starred in a terrible film. But she was an incredible witness. To God's grace. She still is. And in particular.

I think what she has done. So wonderfully. Is she has pointed us. To the hope of a future world. A hope. Of a total redemption of our bodies. She is paralyzed from the neck down. In the book. She wrote about heaven. She says. When on one occasion. I was attending a conference. And at the end of one of the sessions. The speaker invited the 500 people. In the audience. If they were able to kneel.

In front of their seats. As they closed the session in prayer. Johnny watched everyone around her kneel. And as she watched. She couldn't stop the tears. But she wasn't crying out of self pity.

Here is what she said. What was going on in her head. Sitting there. I was reminded. That in heaven. I will be free. To jump up. Dance. And do aerobics. And though I am sure.

[17:54] That Jesus will be delighted. To see me rise on tiptoe. There is something I plan to do. That may please him more. If possible. Sometime before the party gets going. Sometime before the guests.

Are called to the banquet table. Of the wedding feast of the lamb. The first thing I plan to do. On resurrected legs. Is to drop on grateful.

Glorified knees. And I shall quietly kneel. At the feet of Jesus. Because the day. Is drawing near. When I will be able to kneel again. It is a beautiful picture.

Of a future reality. A reality. Up to this point. In Isaiah 35. There has been little to tell us.

Who are the inhabitants of this world. Who is going to be there. Isaiah actually. Has not told us. Who the identity. Of those. Of them are. So in verses 8 to 10.

[18:50] We find out who they are. And it is actually. A group of people. That have turned off. The default road. Do you remember the two roads. There is one you just go on automatically. But there is a turning.

And it is those. Who have turned off. The default road. And they have taken a road. On which we are told. Welcome to the highway of holiness. That is the first page. And a highway shall be there. And it shall be called. The way of holiness. And the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way. And even if they are fools. They shall not go astray. No mountain shall be there.

Nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it. They shall not be found there. But the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransom 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 sorrow. And Zion shall flee away. There is a highway. It is raised above the surrounding countryside.

[19:50] It is no kind of B road. That you will easily miss. In the middle of nowhere. And you might happen to find yourself on. No. This road is situated. So that you cannot miss it. And we are told.

This highway has a name.

And it has a name. Of a road that can get you to the future. And you have to turn off this default road. Onto the way of holiness. But there is a problem isn't there. There is a dilemma here.

Because at the entrance to this highway. Isaiah says there is a checkpoint. There is a checkpoint at the entrance to the road. Where they check your visa. Because not everyone can proceed onto this road.

In fact it says. Doesn't it. That the unclean. Verse 8. Will not pass on it. What is the visa requirement.

Needed for this road. It's that you are clean. It's that you belong to the Lord's redeemed.

[20 : 56] At least that doesn't clarify it very much for me. I don't really understand. What does it mean unclean. I don't understand what you mean by redeemed. What do you mean? And again Isaiah uses the language of Exodus.

To help us. Because back in Exodus. Chapter 6. In verse 6. God makes this promise to his people. Who were slaves at the time of Egypt. He says. I am the Lord. And I will bring you out.

From under the yoke. The burden of slavery. I will free you from being slaves to the Egyptians. And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm. And with mighty acts of judgment. God promised to redeem his people.

To rescue them. To rescue them from slavery. And you read through the early chapters of Exodus. How did he do that? When he does that by sending plague upon plague on Egypt as punishment. And Pharaoh refuses. Doesn't he. To let the Israelites go and worship him. And the plague's climax. After plague upon plague. Was the death of the firstborn son in every family.

[21 : 53] That God would send an angel of death. Through the land of Egypt. To kill every firstborn son in the land. But God says. There's a way for your firstborn son. To be spared.

He says your son does not have to die. He says you take a lamb. A little sheep. You take a lamb. A spotless lamb. And you sacrifice it. And you take the blood of the lamb.

And you put it on the door frame of the house. And then the angel of the Lord will pass over. And your firstborn son will be saved. And God would redeem the firstborn son.

Redeem the family. By the blood of the lamb. The lamb pays the ransom price for the child. And you say. Well what has that got to do with me today? Well here's how the New Testament takes that up. And the Apostle Peter writes to the Christians. In chapter 1 verses 18 to 19. And he says. Knowing that you were ransomed. You were redeemed from a futile foolish way. Inherited from your forefathers.

[22 : 56] Not with perishable things. You weren't redeemed with silver or gold. But with the precious blood of Christ. Like that of a lamb. Without blemish or spot. And you see the visa requirement.

To enter this highway. To enter the way of holiness. Is that stamped on your passport. Needs to be the words. Redeemed by the blood of the lamb. The Lord Jesus Christ.

Would say similar words. To those. Whose people were in Egypt. Almost hundreds of years ago. What would they say? They would say. Isn't it?

We would say. The only reason I am alive. They would have said. The only reason I am alive. Is because a lamb died in my place. The only reason I am alive today. Is because a lamb died in my place.

That's what Isaiah means. In Isaiah 35. That it was the death on the cross. Of the Lord Jesus. That makes the unclean clean.

[23 : 58] It's the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. On the cross. That makes those who are far off. To be brought near to God. And that fits for the new heavens. And the new earth. Doesn't it? That the death of Christ.

Renders you and I holy. And nothing else can do that. That you may think. You can cleanse yourself up. And God might accept you. That he'll look at your life.

And look at your good points. And your bad points. And God will weigh them up. And your good points. Will just somehow tip the scales. That you're okay. And Isaiah says. No. That could not be further from the truth. You are unclean.

And the only way. That you're going to be made clean. Is through the blood of the lamb. The Lord. Jesus Christ. It actually stands to perfect reason. That it is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That gets us onto the highway. Because this whole new world. This whole new world. That's portrayed for you and I. Is only possible because of him.

[24 : 56] It's why when John the Baptist. Sends that message to Jesus. And John the Baptist. Is having second guess. Second thoughts. He wonders. Is Jesus really the Messiah? Is he really the promised redeemer?

And Jesus sends back a message to John. And he says. Go and tell John. What you hear. And what you receive. What you hear. And what you see. And what you hear.

And what you see. You see Isaiah 35. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. Those of leprosy are cured. The death cure. The dead are raised. The good news is preached to the poor.

Jesus is saying. I am the fulfillment of Isaiah 35. I am the one who is bringing in. Ashering in this new world. And in his first coming. That is recorded in the gospels.

You get a taste of what heaven will be like. What it will be like when he comes again. But permission for entrance.

[25 : 55] Onto that road. To the new world. Is simple. But it is hard. Because it means. Doesn't it? Entrance onto that road. Is a humble way. It means saying.

The only way. That I can get into this new world. That you promise. Is by trusting in the one. Who died in my place. The lamb. Who shed his blood. The Lord Jesus Christ. And him alone. I think as you read through Isaiah 35.

It is heavy stuff. You read it. And you think deep down. This is what I am looking for. And yet it almost seems to finish. Doesn't it? At the end of chapter 35. With a multi-climax.

Because the final words. In verse 10. Our sorrow and sighing. Shall flee away. It is good news. That is put in a negative way. After all the heady language.

Of the earlier part of the chapter. It finishes with a negative expression. But there is good reason for that. Why is there good reason for that? Because Isaiah knew. That the present reality.

[27 : 00] Of life on this earth. For the Israelites. And God knows. That the present reality. For your life. And for mine. He knows. That there is a lot of sorrow. And there is a lot of sighing.

And there is a lot of feeling. Absolutely beaten up by this world. Which is why. Near the beginning of this chapter. Are these words in verse 3.

Can you see them? Strengthen the weak hands. Make firm the feeble knees. Say to those of an anxious heart.

Be strong and do not fear. Behold your God. Your God. He will come with vengeance. And with recompense. And he will come and save you.

You see this future world. Is just that. Isn't it? It is a future world. It's not come yet.

[28 : 01] And we are still waiting. For that hope. But the encouragement. To you and I. Now. To those who literally. Isaiah says.

Well they have anxious hearts. Hasty hearts. Hearts that by default. Jump to fear. Our hearts are fear factories. We are always afraid of something.

And the antidote to that. The encouragement for those with hasty hearts. Is set this hope before you. Literally. Behold your God. Because your God will come.

He will come. It doesn't say that he might come. It says he will come. And he will come. And he will put all things right. And he's going to usher in a new world.

The sure hope. Of a certain future reality. And that is what he says. Keeps you going. In the midst of all your discouragements. And that is where you have to keep your focus.

[29 : 00] Behold your God. Your God who is going to come. You and I. You are so consumed with present reality. That we don't know how to find encouragement. When our hearts.

Are racing around all over the place. Because we don't think of the hope. That is before us. Isaiah says. Here is where you get encouragement. You look forward to that day.

In 1947. In 1947. The author of the civil rights campaign. Howard Thurman. He gave a lecture at Harvard. On the meaning of Negro. Spiritual Negro music.

And he was responding. That there was loads of criticism. Of kind of African American spiritualists. You know. Swim Lows who charge. That sort of stuff. The criticism was how otherworldly they were. It says that. The slave songs were filled with all references. To heaven and salvation. And judgment day. And crowns. And robes. And thrones. And the argument was.

[29 : 56] That all those songs. About heaven and resurrection. And judgment day. It made the slaves docile. And they were more submissive. And they would have been better. Without those songs looking forward.

Thurman responds in this way. The facts have made it clear. That this faith. This sung faith. Served to deepen the capacity. Of the slaves for endurance. And for their ability.

To absorb their suffering. It taught people. How to ride high in life. How to look squarely in the face. Those facts that argue. Most dramatically. Against all hope. And to use those facts.

The raw material. Out of which they fashioned a hope. Their environment. With all this cruelty. Could not crush. This enabled them. To reject annihilation.

And affirm. A terrible right to live. Because they believed. In a new heavens. And a new earth. They believed. In a historical Jesus.

[30 : 56] Who came once. And is coming again. And who is going to usher in. A new world. Because they believed. In God's justice. Which means. That all wrong.

Would be judged. And salvation. Would be brought. For those who trusted in God. And even though. They lived. In a horribly. Cruel world. Even though.

They were in an environment. That had hopelessness. And despair. Written all over it. They said. No. That is not the reality. Of where I'm going. That's got to be.

Where our hope is. And it allowed them. To fashion our hope. So that their environment. Wouldn't crush them. And as you hold out.

On to this hope. Of a future world. It will enable you. To face. Whatever environment. You are in. That feels crushing. To you right now. As Isaiah says.

[31 : 51] They could be strong. And not fear. Because they could behold. Their God. Their God who will come. To God who will come. With vengeance. And with divine retribution. But he will come. To save.

And I find it hard. To believe. That there's anyone. Here this morning. Who would not look. At the future. And say in some way. Whether you. Believe. Whether you're a Christian. Or not. Whether you consider yourself. An agnostic. Or an atheist.

There's got to be. Something at you. That reads Isaiah 35. And says. I want this. But I think Isaiah. Puts into. Words. The yearning. Of every single human heart.

But you are not. Going to get here. By default. Chapter 34. That is where. The default road lies. That is what. Unclean lives lead to.

It's where sinful hearts. And rebellious attitudes. It's where people. Who want to live for themselves. Will end up. Who want God. To leave them alone. That's where it goes.

[32 : 50] But here is. An invitation. To take the road. Less traveled. Here is. An invitation. On to the highway. On to the way of holiness.

That leads to the world. You've been dreaming of. Here is an invitation. To trust in the one. Whose blood has redeemed us. From our sin. Who opens up.

The highway. To a brave new world. And the consequences. Of your response. To this invitation. Will go with you.

For eternity. Let us pray. To a brave new. Okay.