

Redemption Road

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[0 : 00] We're going to return back to the passage that we read together in Isaiah chapter 35. It comes after a couple of pretty heavy chapters.

In fact, we've been looking at a lot of heavy chapters, at least in sections. Sections and passages about judgment and about God coming to His own people and also to the nations around about with His sovereign power in acts of judgment.

So how would you speak to an unbeliever about the day of judgment, or the day of vengeance, as it's spoken of here? Or even how do you speak to an unbeliever, especially today, who might not have a background in the Bible and in the truth of the Bible? How would you speak to an unbeliever about judgment and about even eternal life, which is a slightly more positive concept?

Because we've been dealing a lot with judgment in the book of Isaiah thus far, and it can be tough reading. It can be tough reading for as even as Christians as we look at it.

And chapters 33 and 34 speak further about judgment and judgment on Edom, and that really symbolizes and pictures final judgment. And then we come to this passage here, which speaks about also judgment in the, within the reality of redemption, and we'll come to it in a minute.

[1 : 47] But it's important for us to remember that some truth is just plain difficult. It's just hard, because God is God, and we are not. It's not that we come to God and bargain with Him about what's good truth or what is acceptable truth, because then He ceases to be God, and He's simply a product of our own imagination. If God is God and God is real, as we believe, then we need to remind ourselves that we are not. And it's impossible for us to truly grasp His holiness. We attempt and we have, God gives His eyes to see a little bit, but we can't really grasp His holiness, His purity, His perfection. We certainly don't grasp the depth of our own darkness and rebellion and the condition of our own hearts in relation to God, nor can we really grip and grasp eternity. You find eternity a bit mind-blowing, the idea, a bit scary even. I certainly do. It's a difficult concept for us to understand. And the natural, all of us naturally, are unable to understand these concepts. We need faith and we need prayer and we recognize that, and that's important. But some truth is plain hard. But also we need to recognize as we deal with these issues that everybody wants wrongs to be made right. We know that. Maybe, of course, on our own terms, and we see it increasingly today as absolute truth is pushed to the side and it becomes much more relativistic. We see it in its extreme, in its extremity, in the victim culture, where everybody wants to blame other people for their reality and their lives. Some of it is real and some of it is good, some of it's important, but it can go to very unhelpful extremes. But we do know, everybody knows that things are wrong in us, things are wrong to us, and things are wrong in the world.

There is an inherent, even if it's broken, there's an inherent sense of justice within people. And that leads to the reality that deep down, every single person knows that there's a judgment day. Everybody knows there's a judgment day. It may be deeply suppressed to the point of it not being recognized. It may be rejected. People may be fearful of it, but it is down there somewhere in every living soul. I mean, Romans 1 speaks to us about that. And I think it helps explain the irrational hatred that people have towards Christianity or towards the gospel, which does often seem entirely irrational. There's a fear behind that irrational rejection. But the reality of judgment is a shadow that lies behind the need for everyone to be accepted, to have a sense of worth, to have a sense of value, or the desire for achievement. I often think of that great film, I probably use it, I do have many illustrations, you know that, if you've been here for 22 years.

I kind of use the same ones, sorry, I use the same ones quite a lot. And maybe I'm not supposed to use that one. But it's from a great film, Saving Private Ryan, where you know that there's a group of guys that have to go into the front line to save this private because four of his brothers have been killed in action. And the president of the United States commissions this group to go and take

Private Ryan out of the war in Europe back to his mother, because he's the only remaining son. And of course, in the course of that expedition that they have, a number of them are killed. And the captain of that small group, Captain Miller, is dying on the bridge near the end of the film. And Private Ryan is with him. And as he's dying, he says to Private Ryan, earn it, earn it. And of course, at the end of the film, Ryan himself is an old man. And he's at the grave of Captain Miller. And he says, every day, I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I tried to live my life the best that I could. I hope it was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have done for me. That sense of being accountable, of being judged for the kind of life he lived. And I think, however it's expressed, people have that recognition. And yet it's a difficult thing to talk about, because we're already surrounded by a lot of depressing news all the time, even though we have much as Christians, and as people, Christians are not, to be thankful for. But the truth of God's Word, no one would make this up, is that actually, there's worse to come. There's worse to come than the depressing news that we recognize and see all around us. We recognize in chapter 34 verse 8, for the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense. And there is worse to come. For the Jews that Isaiah was writing for, there was worse to come. There was a Syrian aggression, and there was captivity in Babylon.

[7 : 59] There was worse judgment, historically for them to come. But all of this judgment, all of this involvement of God in their lives was also pointing forward to the God who will finally judge every act, every thought that's imperfect, every selfish and sinful and dark and evil reality. It's a judgment that reaches into our hearts, as well as externally to the nations in the world in which we live.

His perfect justice, His holy justice, His holy wrath leaves no one on our own able to stand, on our own able to stand, and ushers us into an unimaginable desert existence. And that's from much of the imagery in Isaiah. It's about fruitfulness and about desert. It's about the garden and it's about the wilderness. And that illustration is used throughout the book to highlight the difference between being under God's wrath and being under God's salvation.

It's the withdrawal of His eternal and beautiful love to those who reject Him. It's very solemn. It's a very solemn reality that we often choose not to think about in our lives.

How do we know this? How do we know this reality for us? As I mentioned earlier, we recognize and know it by faith because we believe God's own claims. We believe God's own claims about His Word and what He says. We believe that Bible is God breathe and it speaks truth to us. And we know that much of it in Isaiah has been heavy, judgment and salvation. And much of us, and much of the time we'd rather avoid it. It's about like a nagging pain you might have in your body. You kind of fear the worst. But you choose to put off going to the doctor because you don't want to hear what might be extremely bad news.

And that's a dangerous way to live physically and spiritually. We also need to recognize there are truths that we are to face up to and recognize by faith in the living God. We know therefore by faith. We also know it because Isaiah is planted in the middle of history, or it's planted in the middle of God's Word. And the prophetic reality of judgment on His own people and indeed on the nations around came true. For Israel and the surrounding nations, what was prophesied, the judgment and redemption is what has come true. The captivity, the remnant, the rise and fall of Assyria and Babylon is undeniable history. It's absolute real history for us. And therefore we recognize that as prophecy has revealed itself to be true, then it enables our faith to grow and become stronger. So therein lies our hope, and they're coming at a good bit. Therein lies our hope because the prophetic message of chapter 35 speaks both about future judgment from Isaiah's time and incredible hope because it speaks about redemption and life. It's a prophecy of Jesus

[11 : 28] Christ. It's a prophecy moving forward of Christ's incredible sacrificial love and His redemptive answer to our lostness and our need. It's this great view forward that speaks both of the Christ that we know and has already been, and the Christ that is still to come. There's a great fusion of the prophecy of the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. It was a message of hope for the Old Testament people that there would be a redeemer, that there would be a future for all who remained and put their trust in Him. And for us, as we've seen God's saving purposes revealed, it gives us great hope, faith and hope because of God's great love. So let's just for a moment look at chapter 35, redemption through judgment, a future prophecy, because we see immediately as it introduces itself, it's speaking about the wilderness being turned into a garden, that imagery that comes again and again and again, and it comes because it speaks about the sacrifice of Christ. Verse 4, middle of verse 4, behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of

God, He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, 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. So it's relating to us, the coming of the Messiah, the coming of Jesus Christ, and it reminds us that there has already been a day of vengeance, there has already been a day of judgment. As He comes in judgment, He will come and save you. And it's speaking very much about the first coming of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross, where God's judgment upon us for our sins was dealt with.

And it's that great reality. Second Corinthians 5, 21, He who knew no sin became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. And it's bringing forward, therefore, the day of judgment for everyone who will put their trust in Him. As a believer this evening, your day of judgment has been. It has passed. It can never happen again. And that reality is surrounded by some of the signs that happened during the first coming of Jesus Christ. The eyes of the blind were opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, and the lame man shall leap like a deer. What does that remind you of? Does it remind you of silver and gold, have I none? But such as I have, I give a U in the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk. And the man rose up and danced and walked into the temple as the gospel was proclaimed. And there's this great reminder of the healing miracles around the coming of Jesus

Christ surrounding His ministry, speaking of His work and speaking of the ultimate spiritual healing that we'd bring. And that we would be those who would be seeing and hearing and following Jesus because of His great work on our behalf. And it speaks of the water breaking forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. Does that speak of but Pentecost? So clearly the Spirit being poured out upon the people on the day of Pentecost and changing the spiritual desert and the climate of the day into one of living relationship with God, streams in the desert, the living water of Jesus Christ. I am the water when you come to me, you will never thirst again, light in the darkness, rejoicing through the grace of God being revealed. And that, what Jesus has done, as God looks at it, that's exactly what He sees. He sees that spiritual wilderness of unbelief being changed into a garden through the indwelling of the Spirit and the life-giving reality that

Jesus brings to us in the hope that we have. So we've got the sacrifice of Jesus spoken of here, but we also have spoken of here the highway of hope, the redemptive highway in verse 8, and a highway will be there and it shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it and so on. And it's incredibly pictorial language speaking of those who follow Jesus and who walk the way of the gospel. It's a picture of those who trust in Jesus Christ.

It's interesting in Acts that five times Christians are called followers of the way. And that reality was something that was in their psyche. Maybe from Jesus himself, we said, I am the way, the truth and the life, but also from this idea of the Old Testament idea of the highway of holiness, the way of truth that those who were redeemed would be walking on.

[17 : 05] And the prophecy here in Isaiah 35 encompasses both the journey, the way, and also the destination, the city of Zion. And it's a reminder to us of the life we are living today as we journey as believers towards eternity. It's a place, this way following Jesus is a place of new spiritual life. We're told in 9 and 10 that the redeemed shall walk there, the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. So the way is spoken of as the journeying place of those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, bought by His precious blood on the cross.

The incredible reality of the difference that the Holy Spirit makes in our lives, is that we have a spiritual vitality and a spiritual life that transforms who we are.

We can worship, we can love God, love others, we can even love ourselves in the way that we were intended to be loved. Katrina and I were recently with Rosie, we were in the Canary Islands, and it's such a great picture, a great example of the difference between the desert and the garden, because it is, it's just a black volcanic rock, it's hardly the highlands of Scotland by any stretch of the imagination. It's very dull, it's very dry until you get to the areas that are irrigated, and it's beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

The most amazing exotic plants grow there, and it is stunning. And that is the spiritual reality that we're being reminded of, that out of Christ, there's nothing but dark volcanic rock.

And in Christ, there's a spiritual fruitfulness, a spiritual vitality and liveliness. The redeemed are those who have been bought back by Jesus Christ, the Old Testament concept of the Kingsman Redeemer, who would have the right to take his helpless relatives' needs and debts, take them on himself as his own. You see it beautifully in the Book of Ruth, the whole idea of God's substitutional

love and care and protection of us in Christ. With great gladness and joy, we are those who have heard Jesus say, I'll pay, I'll pay for you, I'll pay the price, I'll take the debts.

[20 : 00] So it's a way of new life, it's a way of holiness, and that is a great reminder to us of the gospel. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness.

We have come away from our own folly, we have come away from our own self-reliance, and we are covered in the holiness of Jesus, His righteousness, for sure we're covered in His righteousness, and we can claim His perfect life for our own. But we're reminded that we're made clean by this Savior. The unclean shall not pass over it. We're made clean by Jesus Christ, and we are to journey with that attitude, and we're to journey with that realization, and we're to journey with that walk of faith and holiness. We're called to be holy people living in dependence and gratitude on Him, seeking to follow Him, live with a sense of our own need. Spoken so beautifully this morning by Corey and the passage about shepherding and the significance of knowing our need and knowing that we go to Him for cleansing and washing. You can't avoid on this way the battle against sin and selfishness. It simply can't be done. We have the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us, but we will never drift our way into heaven. We will never just find that it's an easy passage because we have two natures, and we're battling against our fallen and sinful and selfish nature, but we are empowered on this way of holiness to follow Jesus Christ. And so this great picture of a way of holiness leads us to a city. It leads us to the city of unparalleled joy, where's 10, and the ransom of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing, everlasting joy shall be in their heads, they shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

So what we remember and the older you get, the more this hits home is that our lives are not cyclical. I don't think, anyway, let's think that they're linear. We're coming to a destination. We're coming to an end. We're traveling. Our lives have a linear destination, and for believers it's an incredible destination. Judgment day has already passed. We've seen that.

It's been meted out. So our future in Christ is entirely positive. I'm not saying for a moment that we're not afraid of getting old, and I'm definitely not saying we're not afraid of dying.

I think the process of getting to our destination is not that pleasant for many of us, unless Jesus comes back first. I remember my dad saying once shortly before he died, he said, I'm not afraid of not afraid of death, but I'm afraid of dying. Sorry. I'm afraid of dying. And I think that's a reality for us. I'm not an unreasonable one in many ways, but we take our fear to Him even in the valley of the shadow of death, because this prophecy is a blend both of a journey and a destination, because it speaks at the, if you go back to the beginning of the chapter, it speaks to our final destination and what it looks like. There's a glory of a new creation. It's this blossoming, blossoming abundantly and rejoicing, rejoicing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. It's just a gentle hint towards the restoration and the reversal of all the curse and the falleness of sin entering into the world. It's the redeeming and renewing us back into the garden. Lebanon was synonymous with natural fertility,

[24 : 32] Carmel with cultivated order, Sharon with innate beauty. And all of these things speak of the new creation, the new physical world that we will enjoy. But way beyond that glory that we will enjoy in the physical universe will be the glory of the Lord. And we shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. We can't grasp His glory really. We can't grasp His holiness, but there will be a day when we will, when we will see and when we will understand and when we will be genuinely, eternally awestruck at His majesty and His glory. And it is a place therefore of overwhelming gladness. Isn't that a beautiful little vignette really in the middle of a book that has got so much heaviness and darkness and judgment in many ways, but overwhelmingly great in comparison? Because both in creation there will be this great gladness. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus that shall blossom abundantly, but also they're redeemed themselves. Not only will creation sing, but we will sing with creation. It will be a, it's a place of great happiness and great joy. The struggles of life will be an evaporating memory, sorrow and satan shall flee away. Sorry. And microphones will work perfectly in the new creation. We might not need microphones. That'd be great. I certainly not need preachers, which is even better. Overwhelming gladness and unbridled, the unbridled joy. One of the great examples or illustrations would be the unbridled joy of a family wedding. You know, with the people you love around you, the people you want to be there, the family that you love there as well, that great unbridled joy multiplied infinitely in the new creation with the church being the bride. And we have a great joy of the feast, the wedding feast of the Lamb. So it's a beautiful, and why is it so important? Because it's in the middle of a book that

speaks about judgment that has already, we've seen being meted out on Babylon, on Assyria, on the captives of Israel, on Jesus and the cross. It's all come true.

So it's important that we recognize that this aspect, not just the way that we're in just now, that speaks of our Christian walk, but the future is utterly reliable from the living God. And so I leave you with a word of encouragement that, well, God leaves you with a word of encouragement, really from verse 3, strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees, say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong and fear not. And that's what we're called to do. Don't be afraid in the Christian life. You know, on this way now, on this Christian walk, sometimes it just feels like a desert, and it doesn't feel very easy. But we can remind ourselves that God in Christ has acted on our behalf. He will return for you, and He will take you home. So we're called to be strong in Him, our hands of action, our knees of stability, our hearts of conviction, to be strong in Him as we look to Him and remind ourselves that it's a safe road that we're on.

Verse 9, no lion will be there, no ravenous beast come up on it. They shall not be found there, protected from this great symbolic picture of darkness and evil and opposition. Darkness and death has lost its sting. There's no turning back. It's a great way to be on. I hope and pray that you're all on that way. And if you're not, I would deeply encourage you to consider Jesus Christ, who says, I am the way, the truth and the life. Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand who you are and understand this great picture, prophetic picture of your work, both that we can look back at in Christ from 2,000 years ago and can recognize the way that believers have been on ever since Pentecost and can look forward as we remind ourselves when we celebrate with the sacrament that we do this until He comes. You're coming to take us home and we rejoice in that.

We rejoice in that perspective and we pray for deeper faith to believe it. We pray for greater wisdom to live it and we pray for greater courage to be able to walk on this road by looking to you and by relying on you and by seeking your strength and knowing what it means to be indwelt by your spirit. So protect us. We pray this evening. Pray for any who might have come this evening just on the edge of the road feeling like they want to give up, walk away or are struggling with the difficulty of following Jesus. We pray that there may be a word for them this evening and may also always be a word for each of us as we remember who you are and your great and glorious promises, commitment to us and outstanding love for us. Help us to grasp your holiness tonight and what it means to walk on the way of holiness today in Edinburgh in 2023.

Help us be free, O Lord. Amen.