

Isaiah 35:1-10

The Prophet Isaiah frequently makes use of **contrasts** in his prophecies, and that's also the case this morning. In Chapter 34, just **prior** to our text, God gives a graphic indictment of His **enemies**, and He vividly describes their **fate**. But by **contrast** in our text for today, God establishes a note of **happiness** and **rejoicing**, as He tells us about **A Day Of Joy And Gladness** for **His** people. The **ultimate** meaning of that day is the **Judgment Day** - the day on which we will enter into the eternal glories of **heaven**, but along the way, there are many other **secondary** meanings as well. In our text today, we will see **A Day Of Joy And Gladness** as it refers to the **desert** - to the people in and around **Isaiah's** time - and to **us**.

In reality, the keynote of **joy** is established with the very first **word** in our text, as it's found in the original **Hebrew**. The first sentences refer to the **desert**, and they roughly translate, "***Rejoice** they will, the desert and the parched land. And **glad** will be the Arabah. They will **blossom** like the **flowers**.*"

The word which I translated **flowers** has an **uncertain** meaning, and that becomes obvious through the wide variety of **translations** which it receives - ranging from the **crocus** in the Evangelical Heritage Version, to the **rose** in the King James Version. Other translations also include the **lily** and the **anemone**. In reality the **crocus** probably makes the most sense to **us**. It's that little flower which comes in purple, and blue, and yellow, and white; sometimes in solids - and sometimes in stripes. And it is one of the **first** flowers to **appear** in the spring - bringing with its tiny blossoms tremendous **joy** following our long, cold **winters**. However, for the people of **Palestine**, a **different** flower probably makes better sense. **There**, at the beginning of their **rainy** season, the land which had been completely **barren** during the **dry** season, literally **bursts** into color with the red **anemone** - a beautiful and fragrant flower which covers the hillsides like a blanket.

The **desert** or wilderness, where these flowers bloom, had somewhat of a **double** meaning in Old Testament times. On the **positive** side, it was one of the places where God **revealed** Himself to His people. However, the desert was **also** a place associated with **danger** and **death**. Lions and jackals roamed the area, and both food and water were **scarce**. **Paths** through the desert were not clearly **marked**, nor were they very **reliable**. And since you were out in the middle of **nowhere**, you were constantly in danger of being **ambushed** by robbers. It's in **this** context that our text continues, "*The glory of **Lebanon** will be given to it. It will be excellent like **Carmel** and **Sharon**. They will see the glory of the **LORD**, the majesty of our **God**.*" Throughout ancient history, **Lebanon** was known for its fabulous **cedar trees**. And

the area from Mt. **Carmel** all the way through the Valley of **Sharon**, was considered to be some of the most fertile **farmland** in the Middle East. Who but the **LORD** would be able to take that kind of **fame** and **glory**, and make it apply to a parched and lifeless **desert**? As I read those words, I was reminded of **another** time when the LORD gave such **glory** to a **desert** - during that 40 year period when the Children of Israel were wandering in the **wilderness**. The LORD caused **miraculous** things to happen there, providing the people with **manna** day after day, and with **quail** in great abundance - even causing **water** to flow out of **rocks**! **Wherever** and **whenever** the LORD pours out His **blessings**, there is great **rejoicing**. And perhaps because of the great **contrast** which is involved, that rejoicing is **especially** evident when the blessings are poured out on a **desert**!

This image of **life** in a **desert**, is an excellent description of our need for **salvation**. You see, in our **natural** state, **we** are like a **desert** - **dead** in our trespasses and sins. But, the LORD has taken our lifeless, sin-burdened lives, and has brought about a radical **change** in us. He has **transformed** our lives into lives that are in harmony with His **holiness**. He has **negated** the results of **sin**, and has **given** us His **glory**. For us, this transformation truly brings about **A Day Of Joy And Gladness**.

But there is **more**. Just as the **desert** has been transformed, so also the **people** will be changed. Our text continues, "*Strengthen the weak **hands**, and make the shaky **knees** steady. Tell those who have a fearful **heart**: Be **strong**. Do not be **afraid**. Look! Your **God** will come with **vengeance**. With God's own **retribution** He will come and **save** you.*" For the people of **Isaiah's** day, it was the impending doom and destruction of the **Assyrians** which struck **fear** into their hearts. After all, what point is there in planning for the **future**, or hoping in **tomorrow**, or working to achieve your **goals**, when there may **be** no future - no tomorrow - and all your hard work will just end up in the hands of your **enemies**? The news on all sides of them was news of **death** and **destruction**. It didn't take much imagination to visualize the fortified cities of Judah - even **Jerusalem** itself - crumbling like **sand** castles under the crushing **waves** of the Assyrian army!

Yet, Isaiah's message was a message of **hope**, and **rightly** so. You see, the people of Judah had forgotten that it was **God** - the **LORD** - who had promised to be **with** them, and to **protect** them. Through divine inspiration, Isaiah saw the Assyrians as **God's** instrument, to **chastise** His wayward people - to lead them **back** to His side once again. Although they would **suffer**, God would **not** allow them to be completely **destroyed**. Rather, **A Day Of Joy And Gladness** still lay in their future, for the LORD would come with a **vengeance**, and He would **save** them.

The words which follow in our text were brought to mind by **Jesus Himself**, in order to show that **He** is the long-awaited **Messiah** - the one who actually **brought** that salvation. Isaiah wrote, *“Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy.”* The wonderful **miracles** which Jesus performed in the lives of the deaf and the mute, the lame and the blind, all offer **proof** that He is the LORD. That fact should offer **us** great comfort **today**. There are still people all around us with trembling **hands** and knocking **knees** - people whose **hearts** are filled with **fear** because of their sins. But the reason Jesus came to the earth, was to strike at the **heart** of our fear, and to **defeat** the powers of sin, death, and hell. That’s why the birth of our Savior, is celebrated as **A Day Of Joy And Gladness**.

As Isaiah continues to speak about the **people** of his day, he returns once again to the picture of **water**. He says, *“Waters will **flow** in the wilderness, and **streams** in the wasteland. The burning sand will become a **pool**, and in the thirsty ground there will be **springs** of water.”* It’s hard for us to **imagine** a desert - which **longs** for water because there is so **little** of it available - being supplied with bubbling **springs** of water, so that it becomes a steady **flow**! The picture reminded me of Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus. After the rich man died and went to hell, he asked Abraham to send Lazarus from heaven to bring him a single **drop** of water, in order to ease his **unbearable** suffering. Like a **desert**, he **longed** for just the **tiniest** amount of water. Imagine what **A Day Of Joy And Gladness** he would have had, if he had not only received that **drop**, but had also been thoroughly **drenched** with water! **Water** is a **life-giving** element. So is our **Savior**! Not only does He quench our thirst for **salvation** by providing us with our **faith** through the water of Holy **Baptism** - but He **also** quenches our thirst for **meaning** and **purpose** in our earthly lives through the water of His **Word**.

The last portion of our text introduces a **new** element - a **highway**. Normally, people would travel **around** a desert because of the **dangers** found there, as well as the unreliability of the roadways. It’s easy to get **lost** in a desert without a **guide** because of the shifting sand. But the dedication of this **highway** will bring about **A Day Of Joy And Gladness**, because this highway is so clearly **marked**, so **well-constructed**, and so **easy** to follow. Our text concludes, *“A **highway** will be there, a road that will be called the **holy** way. The impure will not walk there. It will be reserved for those who walk in that **holy way**. Wicked fools will not wander onto it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious animal go up on it. They will not be found there, but only the **redeemed** will walk there. Then those **ransomed** by the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with a joyful **shout**, and everlasting **joy** will*

*crown their heads. **Happiness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.***”

Unfortunately, there are still so many people who don't make **use** of this highway. They **wander** through life not knowing **where** they are going. In reality, sin has left its mark on **all** of us. We each have our own **private** wastelands - our own **deserts** haunted by **evil**. We may even be **afraid** of the **results** of our sin, thinking that our enemies may rise up against us at **any** time. But because of **Jesus**, our God will not **leave** us in those **wastelands**. How blessed we are to be among those who have been **redeemed**. We know that **Jesus** is the **Way**, the **Truth**, and the **Life**. May we safely **follow** Him on the highway to heaven, and experience **A Day Of Joy And Gladness** when we arrive. Amen.