

Advent 2025
Session Three: Joy
Commentary

Isaiah 35:1-10

35:1–10 This chapter is a mirror image of chap. 34 where God announced that he would turn the nations into a wilderness. In chap. 35, he proclaimed that he would transform the people of God from a wilderness into a garden. The principle of both chapters is that God's people should trust him, not the nations.

35:2 Lebanon ... Carmel, and Sharon were regions especially lush in vegetation (33:9).

35:3–4 God will save his people from the godless nations that oppress them. God's retribution refers to the punishment due the wicked and the reward due the righteous. For this reason, the latter can be strong and not fearful.

35:5–7 God's work transforms those who are blind ... deaf ... lame, and mute. Elsewhere in Isaiah these physical disabilities are metaphors for spiritual shortcomings (29:18; 42:18–19; 43:8). They have been physically dead to godliness, but in the future they will come alive. Not only will the lame walk, but they will leap like a deer. Not only will the mute speak, but they will sing for joy. A similar transformation is described with the language of nature. The parched ground will flow with water. Land that was only suitable for wilderness animals like jackals will be verdant.

35:8 Israel, with its deep wadis and mountainous terrain, was a hard land to cross, but Isaiah foresaw a road. This road will be the Holy Way, a name indicating that it would provide access to God. While the unclean would not travel on it since it led to the presence of a holy God, even the fools would not get lost if they sought to walk this path.

35:9–10 The road described in v. 8 will be a safe road, and it will lead to Zion, where God makes his presence known to his people.¹

Luke 2:8-20

2:8–12. Luke quickly shifts scenes from the king lying where animals eat to burly men protecting animals in their natural homes. Shepherding had changed from a family business as in David's time (1 Sam. 16:11) to a despised occupation. Many shepherds were accused of robbery and using land they had no rights to. Shepherding was also a lonely occupation, particularly at night, as a shepherd stood his watch, making sure sleeping sheep did not wake up and wander and that prowling predators did not attack and devour the sheep. Only God would visit those in such a low occupation and raise them to witness to his salvation. Yet, shepherds had a tender side, counting the sheep constantly (Jer. 33:12–13), lifting the weak on their shoulders (see Isa. 40:11), and creating crude pens where the sheep could sleep (John 10:1).

¹ *CSB Study Bible: Notes* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

Shift the spotlight once more from earth's lowly shepherds enduring a dark night to heaven's most glorious messenger. With the angel came God's glory, his shining majesty, the side of God humans can see and to which they can respond in confession, worship, and praise (see Isa. 60:1–3). As with Zechariah (1:12–13) and Mary (1:29–30), gazing at God's glorious angel terrified the shepherds and brought quick reassurance: Do not be afraid. Gospel is coming, good news. Gospel elicits joy, not fear. Joy is the inward feeling of happiness and contentment that bursts forth in rejoicing and praise. Joy comes not just to lowly shepherds or isolated parents far from home. Joy comes to all people. In the most unlikely place amid the most unlikely spectators, God brushed aside the world's fears and provided the world reason for joy (cf. Isa. 9:3).

Joy centers not in something you earn or possess. Joy comes from God's gift, a tiny baby in a feed trough. But what a baby! Born in David's town, the child clasps heaven's greatest titles in his small fist. Savior, God's title (1:47), becomes the baby's (cf. 1:69). He will follow in the biblical tradition of deliverers (Judg. 3:9, 15; Neh. 9:27; Isa. 19:20; cf. Acts 5:31; 13:23). A troubled, powerless people will find a hero able to overcome the enemy. Christ or Messiah, the promised Anointed One, the king who would sit on David's throne and deliver oppressed Israel. The birthplace of the king who first united the nation now births the king who offers unity to the world. The Lord is the title Luke uses most often for Jesus. This title refers to the holy, unspeakable personal name of God himself. This baby in the manger was God himself (cf. 1:32, 35), with all power and all authority under heaven. Bow in obedience to the baby of Bethlehem. You will easily find him, the only baby wrapped up like an infant but lying in the trough where animals eat.

2:13–14. An angelic chorus burst on the scene, confirming the original angel's message and singing heavenly praise to God. God revealed his glory in brilliance that shepherds could recognize. Angels recognize the worth and weight of God's presence and praise him for it. God gains glory. People get peace. God is in heaven; people, on earth. All this happens because God's favor, his good will, his choice rests on people.

2:15–16. Angelic presence does not last forever. Angels leave. People must respond. How would shepherds respond—these tough men whose theological education came from the heavens and meadows rather than the synagogue and its rabbis? No quibbling or quarreling! Rather, they made an immediate decision—to go to Bethlehem to see what God had reported to them. They wanted to be part of the work God was doing in his world. They saw God's work in the face of a baby lying in a manger. What audacity that God would use society's lowest occupations and its most meager resources to begin his awesome work of salvation.

2:17–20. Seeing the baby Jesus was not enough for the shepherds. They had to share the story. Everyone they met heard from them about angelic visits, angelic songs of praise, and a trip to a manger to find the baby of God's glory. Most important, they shared what had been told them about this child. The fact of the child was news. The function of the child was gospel. Shepherds

found in a manger the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord himself. They let everyone in hearing distance know.

One word characterized their audience: amazed. Shepherds became Jesus' first evangelists. Surprise, astonishment greeted the first testimonies about Jesus. Surprise soon gave way to wonder and marvel at what God had done. Everyone in Bethlehem began talking about God's mysterious surprise—a surprise made known firsthand only to a couple from Nazareth and unappreciated shepherds carrying out their lonely nighttime tasks. The mother responded differently. She had incubated amazement for nine months. Now she incubated experiences in her mind, experiences that gradually became treasured memories, each showing something new and different about her son, each confirming Gabriel's promise of greatness for this Son of David and Son of the Most High. Surely nothing was impossible with God (1:30–37).

Shepherds came. They saw what God told them to expect. They proclaimed their findings to all who would listen. They turned back toward their jobs, a new song of praise in their hearts. What God had said, God had done. They returned to the sheep, never to be heard of again, but never to be forgotten.

The Son of God had to endure the rituals of a Jewish son. Obediently, Mary and Joseph performed the operation that dedicated the baby to the covenant faith of the Jews—a covenant faith initiated long ago as Abraham performed the first circumcision rites on his people (Gen. 17). Then the high moment came; they could officially announce his name. He would be called Jesus, just as the angel instructed (1:31). God's Savior was here.²

Romans 10:14-15

All this talk of salvation to Jews and Gentiles reexposes Paul's true heart. In the first few verses of his long letter to Rome, he declared his mission "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake" (Rom. 1:5, NASB). His desire to enlist the church at Rome as a partner in his task is the primary reason for his lengthy epistle—making sure that they understand the gospel he has been called to declare. But the gospel is not just for the Gentiles; it is for the Jews as well. It serves us well to hearken back to the objection he is laboring to answer: "Has God's word to Israel failed?" (see Rom. 9:6). His answer is No! All Israel has to do to regain the blessings of her heritage is believe—"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). But calling on the name of the Lord does not happen in a vacuum. Paul outlines for the believers in Rome how God saves people. It is not through the evidence of his handiwork in creation (Rom. 1:20). It is not through works or the law (Rom. 9:32). Rather, it is through the preaching of the gospel.

10:14a. Calling requires faith. How ... can they call on the one they have not believed in? In the Old Testament, calling on the name of the Lord was a metaphor for worship and prayer (Gen. 4:26; 12:8; Ps. 116:4). No one can call out to God who has not believed in him.

² Trent C. Butler, *Luke*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

10:14b. Faith requires hearing. And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? More than anything else, this question is the crux of all missiological activity since the first century. God has ordained that people have to hear (or read, or otherwise understand the content of) the word of God in order to be saved. One who knows the gospel must communicate it to one who does not know it.

10:14c. Hearing requires preaching. And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? Since no other media except the human voice was of practical value in spreading the gospel in the first century, preaching is Paul's method of choice. And yet, in the media-rich day in which we minister, has anything replaced preaching as the most effective way to communicate the gospel? We thank God for the printed page, and even for cutting-edge presentations of the gospel circling the globe on the internet. But it is still the human voice that cracks with passion, the human eye that wells with tears of gratitude, and the human frame that shuffles to the podium, bent from a lifetime of Service to the gospel, that reaches the needy human heart most readily. Hearing may not require preaching in person today, but it always benefits from it.

10:15. Preaching requires sending. And how can they preach unless they are sent? Even when his servants were unwilling (e.g., Jonah), God has been sending the message of salvation to the ends of the earth from the beginning. Paul, a "sent one" (apostle, apostolos), was sent to the Gentiles, and he needed the church at Rome to help him. But he also wanted them to be available for God to send them. There were many, many Jews in Rome who were still stumbling over the stone in the path of salvation. How would they ever call on the name of the Lord unless someone is sent? Paul wants the church at Rome to get in step with those who have borne good news to Israel before, most specifically those who brought the good news of their deliverance from captivity in Assyria.³

³ Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).