

“EVERLASTING DESTRUCTION AND EVERLASTING JOY”

These two chapters are the last part of a section that began back in chapter 28, a collection of oracles that relate to the threat that Assyria posed to Israel's northern and southern kingdoms in Isaiah's day. I want to call your attention to the fact that this section ends by looking beyond the Assyrian crisis to the final judgment that will take place at the end of history. We have seen the same sort of thing in the previous sections of this book. Isaiah often begins a section by talking about a specific historical situation, but by the end it is clear that he is talking about something much bigger than that. This is something that we often see in biblical texts that deal with the twin themes of the judgment of God's enemies and the vindication of God's people. The reason why this is the case is because God's temporal judgments are precursors of his final judgment. This is why it is so natural for Isaiah to move from oracles that deal with God's judgment upon Assyria to oracles that deal with God's climactic judgment upon all of his enemies at the end of history.

In the two chapters that we are studying today, we are reminded that God is moving all of history towards a goal. This goal is the theological lens through which we are to understand everything that takes place in this world. Regardless of how things may appear at any given moment, we need to

remember that the Lord has appointed a day of vengeance, or recompense, for the cause of Zion. And we must not forget that there are only two possible outcomes for every human being on that great and dreadful day. This is what we are shown in these two chapters, where *the Lord declares that all who oppose him will be given over to everlasting destruction and promises that all who put their trust in him will be brought to a place of everlasting joy.*

The Lord Has Rage toward His Enemies

The two parts of this passage correspond to its two chapters. Chapter 34 is about God's decree of judgment for his enemies, while chapter 35 is about his promise of salvation to his people. As we look at chapter 34, I want to point out three things that it tells us about God's judgment. First, it says that the Lord has rage toward his enemies. This is the theme of verses 1-4. Though some people take offense at the notion of a God who displays wrath, there is no other way for God to uphold his justice. What kind of a God would the Lord be if he was not angered by human rebellion and the devastation that it brings about? What kind of a Creator would he be if he did not hate the things that ruin the good world that he has made? What kind of a Judge would he be if he did not hate injustice? The fact of the matter is that God would not be much of a God if he were not a

God who gets enraged at those who oppose him. As one commentator puts it, “Judgment is a natural corollary of the fact that God is king (chapter 33). A king must rule, or he is no king at all, and that means rebellion must finally be put down.” [Webb, 142] In these verses, the Lord is putting the world on notice. Yes, he is exceedingly patient, but he will not tolerate insurrection forever. At the appointed hour, the curtain will come down on this evil age, and all who live in rebellion against their Maker will be devoted to destruction.

The Lord Has a Sword for His Enemies

The second thing that we learn about judgment in chapter 34 is that the Lord has a sword for his enemies. This is the point being made in verses 5-7. The imagery is quite vivid here, as the Lord talks about his sword drinking its fill of blood in the land of Edom. Edom was one of the nations that bordered Judah, a nation that was a perpetual enemy of God’s people throughout the Old Testament. Bozrah, which is mentioned in verse 6, was Edom’s capital city. In light of the emphasis on final judgment in this chapter, it is fairly clear that the Lord is using Edom as a symbol for all of the enemies of his people. The imagery of sacrifice and shedding of blood in these verses reminds us that the Lord requires blood payment for sin. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “without the

shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." [Heb. 9:22] It is important to understand that this is not some arbitrary principle or the unreasonable demand of a bloodthirsty deity. [see Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 493] Rather, blood represents the life of the transgressor, and God's law declares that the wages of sin is death. God's justice has to be vindicated by a blood payment for sin. This is why Jesus had to offer himself up on the cross in order to secure our salvation. As Peter writes in his first letter, we have been ransomed "with the precious blood of Christ." [1 Pet. 1:19] And as Paul writes in Ephesians 5:2, "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

The Lord Has a Day of Vengeance for His Enemies

The third thing that this chapter teaches us about judgment is that the Lord has a day of vengeance for his enemies. This is the theme of verses 8-17. It begins by describing the final judgment as "a year of recompense for the cause of Zion." In other words, the Lord will punish all of those who oppose Zion's cause. This is not talking about the cause of the modern state of Israel. It is not warning us of the grave danger that our nation would be in if we did not give unqualified support to the nation of Israel today. The modern state of Israel is not a holy nation but a secular one. It is no different than any other nation. The

true Israel is no longer limited to one political state and people, but is an international assembly “from every tribe, kindred, and nation.” [Rev. 5:9] When God says that he has a day of vengeance for those who oppose the cause of Zion, he is referring to the judgment that awaits all who set themselves against Christ and his church.

This day of judgment is described as a day of eternal torment. As it says in verse 10, “Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever.” This verse is alluded to in Revelation 14:11, where it says of those who are ensnared by the world: “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.” Such passages make it clear that the Bible does not teach annihilationism, a doctrine that says that lost souls will simply cease to exist on the day of judgment. On the contrary, the Bible tells us that hell will be unending torment, “the punishment of eternal destruction that comes from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” [2 Thes. 1:9, fn]

The other way in which the day of vengeance is described here is by depicting the nation of Edom as an utter wasteland. The dwelling place of God’s enemies will become the possession of a whole host of unclean creatures: hawks, porcupines, owls, ravens, jackals, ostriches, hyenas, and wild goats. Isaiah says

that it will be a land of confusion and emptiness. That description is especially significant, because the Hebrew words translated as “confusion” and “emptiness” are the same words that are translated in Genesis 1:2 as “without form and void.” Isaiah is saying that the order that the Lord brought upon the world when he first made it will be completely removed for those who are given over to judgment. They will dwell in a land of chaos forever.

The Lord’s Presence Brings Joy to His Weary People

This brings us to the second part of our passage, chapter 35, where the focus is on more pleasant things: the everlasting joy that is promised to God’s redeemed people. The first thing that we see in this chapter is that the Lord’s presence brings joy to his weary people. This is the point being made in verses 1-2. The picture is one of relief being given to a people who have endured a long and difficult trial. The joy described here is like a barren wilderness being transformed into a place of refreshment. It is like the blossoming of the crocus, the first flower of spring. It is like Laconia enjoying its first taste of summer after a winter that seemed to go on forever. The point is, life in this world is wearisome. This is why the New Testament takes the image of Israel during its wilderness years and applies it to the church. We are exiles and pilgrims, with

no permanent home in this world. We have to endure loss, loneliness, broken relationships, disappointments, sickness, infirmity, and death. While there is much to enjoy in this life, none of its enjoyments bring lasting satisfaction or rest. Again and again, we are confronted by the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. As much as we try to avoid having to face up to these things, immersing ourselves in various distractions and forms of escape, in the end there is simply no getting around the fact that this life is accompanied by many sorrows.

The Bible certainly faces up to this. It readily admits that the fall has resulted in the fact that the creation has been subjected to futility and placed in bondage to decay. God's Word declares that this world is a wilderness, a dry and weary land where there is no water. But that is not all that it says. It also tells us that Jesus invites anyone who thirsts to come to him and drink. He promises to make rivers of living water flow from your heart. Only Christ has the ability to quench the thirst of your soul. As we are told in the book of Revelation, the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And where that river flows, there is no more sorrow or death or pain. This is what the Lord promises in these verses to all who will look to him in faith.

The Lord's Promise Brings Comfort to His Anxious People

The next thing that this chapter tells us is that the Lord's promise brings comfort to his anxious people. This is the point being made in verses 3-7. There are many things in this life that give us cause to worry. There are many reasons to be afraid. There are many questions that trouble us. Why does the Lord allow us to experience so much sadness? Why do we have to wait so long for relief? Why are there so many uncertainties in our lives? Why do we have to endure so much pain?

Where can we find comfort and hope in the midst of such anxieties? We need to fix our eyes on God's promises. This is what the Lord tells us in verses 3-4. The thing that strengthens weak hands and makes firm feeble knees is God's promise to come and save us from all that afflicts us. And we need to remember that the words that are written in the book of Joshua are true in every age: "Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." [Josh. 21:45] We can be even more certain of this than Joshua and his fellow Israelites were, because we know that "all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]." [2 Cor. 1:20]

Notice also the emphasis in this section upon our complete helplessness. Look at verses 5-6, where the people of God are likened to the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute. Look at verses 6-7, where our circumstances are compared

to a scorching and desolate desert. The point of these comparisons is to underscore a point that Isaiah has emphasized again and again in this book. They make it clear that we are totally dependent upon the Lord for our salvation.

The Lord Will Bring His Pilgrim People Home

The third thing that we learn from chapter 35 is that the Lord will bring his pilgrim people home. This is the point that is being made in verses 8-10. Isaiah tells us that God erects a highway for us to travel on during the days of our pilgrimage through this world. The Lord sets our feet on his path and ensures that we do not turn from it. And notice what this highway is called. It is called the Way of Holiness. When the Lord grants us saving faith, he also renews us and sets us free from the desires of the flesh and leads us by his Spirit. This is what the twenty-third Psalm is talking about when it says that the Lord leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. God leads his people on the Way of Holiness. This is an essential part of what is promised to us in the gospel. The gospel is not just a ticket to get out of hell. It is also the promise of a new life, a life that is no longer controlled by sin but by the Spirit of God.

Brothers and sisters, let us make sure that we lay hold of all that is promised us in the gospel. Do not think that you can be saved from sin without being

saved from living in servitude to sin. By all means, trust Christ for forgiveness. But also trust him for holiness. In the words of the author of Hebrews, "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." [Heb. 12:14]

The source of the joy and gladness that is promised in this wonderful passage is God himself. The Lord is the delight of the redeemed. While the presence of God is a terror to those who stubbornly persist in their rebellion against him, it is an immeasurable blessing to those who place their trust in him. And although we still await the ultimate fulfillment of this blessing, we need to remember that the God whose presence brings such joy and refreshment really is with us now, especially when we gather to worship him. I was reminded of this just this past week, as I came across a story told by Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his classic book on preaching. Listen to what he says:

"I remember a woman who was a spiritist, and even a medium, a paid medium employed by a spiritist society... She was ill one Sunday and could not go to keep her appointment. She was sitting in her house and

she saw people passing by on their way to the church where I happened to be ministering in South Wales. Something made her feel a desire to know what those people had, and so she decided to go to the service, and did so. She came ever afterwards until she died, and became a very fine Christian. One day I asked her what she had felt on that first visit, and this is what she said to me...She said, "The moment I entered your chapel and sat down on a seat amongst the people I was conscious of a power. I was conscious of the same sort of power as I was accustomed to in our spiritist meetings, but there was one big difference; I had a feeling that the power in your chapel was a clean power." [*Preaching and Preachers*, 44]

That woman was correct. The holy God makes his presence dwell in the midst of his people. The God of perfect justice, the God of unfathomable mercy, this God is not only *with* us, he is with us in order that he might be *for* us. The cause of Zion is his cause. And if he is for us, who, or what, can possibly be against us?