

Way of Holiness

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah's prophecy, the chapter that we've read there in chapter 35 of the book of Isaiah, looks forward with the aid of the stunning and memorable imagery of a highway, certainly towards the end of the prophecy, it looks forward to the return of God's people to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. I think it's fairly clear that the prophecy does contemplate what we might call that partial fulfillment in the return of an exiled people to Jerusalem. And as we read the prophecy, it would very much tie in with that scenario of God's people returning through the desert to Zion, to Jerusalem. And so, the prophecy was fulfilled in part on that occasion in history when some of God's people, granted the opportunity by God, returned from Babylon to Jerusalem.

But the prophecy, I think also very clearly, as so often is the case with the prophecies in this book and elsewhere in the Old Testament, looks beyond the return of the exiles to Jerusalem. It looks beyond that to the coming of Messiah and the accompanying blessings for God's people as they, as we, are brought home to God, as we make that journey and are brought home to Zion, to God's presence. And these blessings that we enjoy and that the prophecy speaks of are blessings that we enjoy in the here and now as believers, but they're also blessings that are fully enjoyed in the future.

There is a sense in which the prophecy and the language of the prophecy looks beyond even what we enjoy now, given what Christ has done for us, and looks ahead to fuller and greater blessing.

And I think that's the way we need to consider this prophecy. This evening, we won't give any thought really to what we've said concerning its fulfillment in the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, but rather our focus will be on the here and now, but also looking ahead to what awaits us as God's people.

And God's work on our behalf on this occasion is presented, or one of the images that is used to speak of God's work is this picture of a highway. In verse 8 we read, and a highway will be there.

[3 : 03] It will be called the way of holiness. And we want to just spend some time this evening thinking about this highway, this way of holiness, and what can we say about this way. There's really three things that we want to think about. First of all, we want to notice how this is a way that is provided for us by God. Then we'll notice how it's provided by God for God's people. Those who travel on this way are God's people. But then we'll also just think a little bit about how this is a way that as we travel on it, so we find that our deepest longings are satisfied on this highway, on this way of holiness. Satisfied in a measure in the here and now, but satisfied entirely on that day of consummation when God's redeeming work comes to its complete fulfillment. So that's the way we want to think about it this evening. We'll begin by noticing that this highway, this way of holiness, is a way that is provided by God and that leads to God. If we begin simply by noticing what is said at the very beginning of the portion of the chapter that we're thinking about there in verse 8, and a highway will be there. So already in the prophecy, Isaiah has been casting his eye forward to this day, and he says, as we begin the reading of verse 8, and a highway will be there. And I think that statement of the prophet is striking in its simplicity. It simply states that a highway will be there. We're maybe left thinking, well, how did it get there? This is a highway in the desert. There hadn't been a highway there before. How did this highway appear? But it's just there. A highway will be there. And I think that the implication is not a difficult one to draw. And it is simply this, that God is the one who provides the highway. Just to maybe contrast this and illustrate it a little, I have a soft spot for Razzie. I don't know how many people here have been to Razzie. Will you raise your hand if you've been to Razzie? Well, maybe, oh, just a handful. So I don't know if you share my liking for Razzie. Razzie is just a wee island off the east coast of Skye. And my affection for Razzie goes back to a very happy summer that we spent there, oh, I don't know, about 20 years ago when I was at the Free Church College and had a six-week placement on Razzie. But much as I love the place, if I were challenged and somebody said to me, well, what's so good about Razzie? Can you give me a list of its attractions?

As I would try and persuade you to maybe visit the island, I have to be honest and say I'd be struggling a little. It's not a long list of attractions that I could mention. For those of you who know the geography, I might point you in the direction of the, I don't know, the hill or the bend or whatever you'd call it, Duncann from Skye. You can see it. It's a flat-topped hill. Mountain would be rather generous. On Razzie, well, that's one of its attractions. You go and walk to the top.

It's not a big challenge. When I was there, I don't know, I presume it's still there, there was an outdoor center. Well, that drew some people. But I suspect that if I had to put what was at the top of the list of attractions on Razzie, it would be Callum's Road. Now, some of you know what I'm talking about. For those of you who don't, let me just explain about Callum's Road. In the early part of the 20th century, the Sad Callum lived in a wee village in the north of Razzie.

Arnish, I think, was the name of the village. And it was a village of about 90 people. We're talking about the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, first two or three decades of the 20th century.

And the challenge that this particular village had is that from the village to where the road ended, there was no road. So, there was a, I don't know, maybe two or three miles of fairly rough terrain with no road. And so, you can imagine as modernity made its way onto Razzie, it takes its time to get there. But nonetheless, that became a really big challenge for the families who lived there.

[7 : 49] To such an extent that one by one, the families that were there decided to abandon the remoteness of Arnish and set up home in the metropolis that is in Vararish, in the south of the island.

One by one, the families left until ultimately, finally, only Callum and his wife remained. But Callum was a stubborn fellow, and he had no intentions of leaving Arnish. And so, one day, he decided he'd do something. And what did he decide to do? Well, many of you know where I'm going. He said, I'm going to build a road. It's worth saying that over the decades, many requests had been made to Highland Council requesting that this stretch of two or three miles, that a road be built. And the request always fell on deaf ears. And as depopulation took hold, well, the chances had disappeared. So, Callum said, well, no, I'm going to build the road. And that's what he did over a period of a number of years. I'm not sure how long it took him, but the time that he built it straddled the late 60s into the early 70s until finally the road was built. And if you go to Razzie, at the end of the road, where the road meets what had been and still is the existing road, there's a wheelbarrow there that stands as testimony to Callum's Road. And that, I suspect, is the principal tourist attraction on Razzie. Now, why do I tell you the story about Callum's Road?

Well, Callum's Road stands as a worthy monument, and I commend Callum's endeavor. It stands as a worthy monument to human endeavor. And as such, worthy though it is in its place, it stands in stark contrast to the highway that Isaiah paints for us in this prophecy. This highway that we read of then in verse 8, a highway will be there. It will be called the way of holiness. This is a highway built by God, provided by God. No human hand was involved in its design, in its construction, in its provision. God alone is responsible for providing this highway. In the language of the prophet, it's simply there, and a highway will be there. And that is, though, a simple truth, nonetheless, a timely reminder that in this great matter of journeying to God, of coming to know God, there is no place for private construction projects. This is an endeavor that we cannot secure by ourselves. You can't build a road to God. You can't build a highway to heaven. That is beyond your capacity, and it's beyond your remit. Only God can provide a highway to Himself. But of course, that is what He has done, and this is what the prophet speaks of, this highway that has been provided by God.

The road, the highway is a picture of the way provided by God and that leads to God. But if it is a picture, then it must be a picture of something, or indeed of someone. Who or what is that way that is pictured by the highway? Well, we can turn to the words of Jesus as He speaks of Himself to provide an answer to that question, this picture of a highway. What does it speak of? Who does it point to? In John's gospel and in chapter 14 and in verse 6, there are these familiar words, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. This highway provided by God speaks of and points to the one provided by God for us, that we might be brought home into God's presence. So, that's the first thing we can say about this highway. It's been provided by God. But the other thing that we can say, and it follows on very naturally, is that this is a way provided for God's people. Let's turn to the passage and see what it says about those who can walk on the way. We simply follow in the reading there in verse 8, a highway will be there, will be called the way of holiness. The unclean will not journey on it. So, the prophet begins by identifying those who will not be on it. He then goes on to speak of those who will be on it, but he begins by recognizing that there will be those who are not on this highway, and they're described as the unclean. Now, before we move any forward or any further forward, reading that reality provides or presents a problem to us. We're left with the question, or I certainly am left with the question, well, does this reality that the unclean will not journey on it, does that not disqualify us all?

Are we not all, in the light of God's just and exacting standards, unclean? And if that is so, then are we left with that sad conclusion that the highway is there, and it's a wonderful highway, and it leads to God, but we can't be on it, for we are unclean. Well, that might be an initial conclusion, but there is hope for us, even in the language that the prophet uses. The Hebrew word that is translated unclean there in verse 8 is a word that refers to the impurities that were catered for or covered by the offering of sacrifices as prescribed by God. We know that God provided in the Old Testament this system of sacrifices that had as its intention to provide cleansing, so those who were unclean could become clean. And so, even though it is clear, the prophet is clear, that the unclean will not journey on it. That does not mean that there is no hope for those of us who are unclean. What it does mean is that in order to walk on it, we need to be clean. We need to avail ourselves of the means that

[14 : 32] God has provided to be cleansed. That was true for believers in the Old Testament, and of course for us in the New Testament, in the light of the coming and of the saving work of Jesus. We know that Jesus has, by the shedding of His own blood, provided a way of cleansing for the unclean. That would be each and every one of us, to clarify any doubt on that matter. If we wash ourselves in the shed blood of Jesus, that is, if we trust in the merit and efficacy of His atoning death in the place of sinners, then we will know cleansing, and we can walk on this highway that has as its destination Zion or God Himself. This recognition of the need for sacrifice that will secure cleansing is picked up on in the language that follows in these verses that speaks of those who will walk on the road, those who are able to walk on the road. At the end of verse 9, at the beginning of verse 10, there are two words, two verbs that point to the identity of those who can walk on this way. We're told, but only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord will return. We'll go back to what it says in that previous verse about what will not be there. But our focus here is on those who can walk on this way. They need to be cleansed, and then we have this description of them. They are the redeemed and the ransomed. Let's just think of these two words in turn. The word there, redeemed, the verb to redeem. From the same root, you have the noun goel. Now, some of you may be familiar with that word, goel, or redeemer, and perhaps particularly familiar with it in the context of the story of Ruth.

Remember the story of Ruth and the role that was played by Boaz as he took upon himself the mission of the kinsman redeemer. The kinsman redeemer within Israel was a next of kin who had the opportunity, the right, to take upon himself the needs of a helpless relative. Of course, that was the case of Ruth and her mother-in-law. They were helpless. They could not secure a future for themselves. It was beyond their means to solve the problems that they had. And so, a kinsman redeemer, a goel, stepped in, a next of kin. We know from the story that there was somebody else who was closer in terms of familiarity, but that individual didn't want to take on the responsibility. And so, Boaz steps in as the kinsman redeemer to take upon himself the problems of his near relatives, to pay the price that needed to pay the price of his near to the kinsman. And so, the kinsman redeemer is a beautiful picture of Jesus. Boaz is a beautiful picture of Jesus and what Jesus has done for us. He as the Son of

Man, our next of kin, the second Adam, one of us, has taken upon himself our needs and our plight and our sin and paid the price for our redemption. And so, as we trust in him, so we discover him to be our redeemer. So, those who walk in the way are the redeemed. They're also described here as the ransomed. I don't think here in the context of poetry we need to make much of a distinction.

The words are being used synonymously, but certainly this word ransomed also points to and further emphasizes the need for a price to be paid in order to secure our redemption. And we know that that price was paid. It was paid on the cross by Jesus. So, this way is a way provided by God, and it is provided for God's people, for the redeemed, for the ransomed, for those who are unclean but who have become clean as they have availed themselves of God's provision for cleansing. But then thirdly, we want to just notice also that this is a way, this way of holiness, this highway that God provides is a way that satisfies our deepest longings. The redeemed on this way enjoy the fruit of their redemption. And I want to just draw out three privileges of the redeemed as they or as we walk on the road of holiness and the way of holiness. The first one that is very evident in these verses is this privilege of security, a security, a safety that we enjoy in our redeemer, in Jesus Christ.

And that security is security, it is protection from others who would seek to do us harm, but also, as we'll notice as we consider a little one phrase here that I'll highlight in a moment, it's also protection from ourselves. But first of all, let's consider protection from others, which is much clearer in the words of the passage. Notice what it says there about who will not be found there, what will not be found there. In verse 9, we're told, no lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it. They will not be found there. That speaks of security. It speaks of protection from those who would seek to do us harm. They will not be able to do so. We are secure, from the attacks of others. Now, that's a beautiful picture, but I wonder, is it a picture that corresponds to the actual experience of believers? Is it not the case that many believers today, even today, will have been victims of vicious and brutal persecution? And so you say, well, the picture is a beautiful one, but does it actually correspond to reality? How do we answer that that very legitimate concern? I think there's going to be a couple of things that could be said.

[21 : 27] First of all, there is the reality that I hinted at at the beginning, that this picture is a picture that points to our present reality, but also to a future reality where there is a full enjoyment of all that is presented here. And so there is a sense in which we can say, well, yes, the time is coming when all our enemies will be entirely taken away from us and we'll have no capacity to do us any harm, but we haven't reached that point yet. Of course, there's an element of truth in that, a great element of truth in that. But I think there is a sense in which in the here and now, we can claim this promise of protection. There's a very real sense in which in the here and now, we enjoy the absolute protection of God. How so? Well, let me just try and give an answer to that by giving you an example. And it's an example that we find in the book of Acts, in something that we read there that Paul says when he's in Corinth. So Acts chapter 18, verses 9 to 10. Let's just quickly have a look at something that he says there that's at first sight somewhat intriguing. We might even say debatable. But I think as we think about it, it will illustrate the point I'm trying to make about the protection that we enjoy, even in the here and now, when there are enemies who seek to do us harm. Acts chapter 18, verses 9 and 10. Paul is in Corinth and he receives this vision by night.

And we read, one night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. Do not be afraid. Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. For I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city. This is God speaking to Paul. You might say, well, hallelujah. Isn't this wonderful? Paul has given this promise that nobody is going to attack him. And it sounds great, a bit like the prophecy.

It sounds great. But you say, well, hang on a minute. Subsequent to this promise, Paul was attacked on multiple occasions. So what's going on? Is this an empty promise? Like the clue is in what God says, and we'll notice carefully what he says, no one is going to attack and harm you. I think the way of understanding this is that God is saying, yes, you will be attacked. There will be those who seek to do you harm. But in my overriding sovereign control of all that goes on, you will ultimately not do or experience any harm. Everything will be for your good, even the attacks, even the violence, even the persecution that you endure. Painful though it will be, will not ultimately harm you. And so I think there is a sense in which what the security that is promised in this prophecy, though it will be enjoyed in its fullest sense in the future, is enjoyed in a very real sense in the present. That is safety or security from others. But I think these verses of the prophecy also speak intriguingly of safety and protection and security from ourselves. That is not immediately evident in the translation that we have here of verse 8c. It's the final statement that we have in verse 8. I'll read it as it is in the church

Bible. There it says, seemingly to pick up on the matter of who will walk in this way, we read, wicked fools will not go about on it. Now those of you who maybe are familiar with the language of the A.V. of the older version may recall that there the translation is really very different. And to quote the older version, the older translation, it is as follows, the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. Or to use slightly more modern language, which is picking up on the translation in the ESV, the translation is as follows for that final statement in verse 8, even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. The difficulty here is one that we can't altogether overcome. It's simply a difficulty in knowing exactly what is being said in the Hebrew. But I certainly am drawn to this alternative translation that was used in the past and that has been picked up again by the ESV. And let me just state it again, even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. Now isn't that a wonderful promise if we understand it in those ways? God is saying, you know, when I put somebody on this way, they're going to stay in that way, even if they're fools. And so when I look in the mirror and say, well, there's a fool in front of me. And I think, well, will I stay the course? Or will I stray from this way? I come to this promise and God tells me, well, even when you're foolish, even when you are guilty of great acts of folly, you will not stray from the way. You will not fall from this highway.

You will be kept on this way of holiness and you will reach the destination appointed by God. There is security here, not only from others, but even from ourselves. And this is a security we enjoy in and only in our Redeemer. But as well as security, as we think of the fruit of our redemption, not only security, but in these verses we find the blessing, the fruit of direction and belonging.

[27 : 09] Notice what is said there in verse 10, the second half of the verse, they will enter Zion with singing, everlasting joy will crown their heads. This picture of God's people entering Zion. Well, there's a picture there of direction, of where we're heading. And we know where we're heading. We know our destination. We're not wandering aimlessly. There is a destination in view. But it's not only a destination. It's not only a future destination. It also speaks of our present belonging. The reason we're going to Zion is because we're citizens of Zion. Though we're not there yet, that's where we belong. We are citizens of God's kingdom, hence the destination. And so, you know, in this, in what we read there, combined, you have these two aspects of direction and of belonging.

We are still traveling, but we have already a taste for home. You know, this picture that's being painted is one that's picked up on by C.S. Lewis when he speaks of the homesickness of the soul.

And in his own very poetic language, he speaks of the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited, but where we belong. And we travel onwards towards our home. The hymn that we're not going to sing also picks up on that theme. Walking in the King's Highway, Jesus gives a foretaste of the joys above. Walking in the King's Highway, there is a present enjoyment, but there is a future aspect that we will experience in its fullness when we arrive. Indeed, in the next verse of that hymn, music from my homeland fills me with delight. Walking in the King's Highway, visions of his glory break upon my sight. This idea of almost arriving there, really the language here of the prophet, they will enter Zion with singing as we approach. So there is this appreciation of the wonder and the glory of it all that we only appreciate in a small measure now, but that we'll be a growing appreciation as we approach our destination.

Direction and belonging we enjoy in and only in our Redeemer. But then one third fruit of our redemption, and with this we end, that is very clearly the picture painted of joy in our Redeemer.

Again, the words of verse 10, they will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. If we focus just on one of the phrases there, there's a lot said about joy, but let's just focus on one phrase there, the penultimate phrase. Gladness and joy will overtake them. The picture is one that's curious, because it can be understood in one of two ways, although really they end up saying much of a muchness. But let's just notice the two ways in which this can be understood. First of all, in the manner that we have it there in the text, gladness and joy will overtake them. And the picture seems to be of God's people as they approach Zion being overwhelmed by gladness. Gladness and joy overtakes them, and they experience an unbroken and unbreakable happiness as they are overtaken by joy and gladness.

[30 : 56] There's another way in which the Hebrew can be translated, and that is simply to switch the subject and the object. And if you do so, you would have something along these lines, that they, that is the pilgrims, they will overtake gladness and joy. So, it's not gladness and joy overtaking us, but us overtaking gladness and joy. And as I say, the Hebrew allows for those two alternatives. As I say, the difference in meaning isn't perhaps very great, but this second way of understanding it, it pictures the redeemed as they approach Zion finally fully grasping the joy and the gladness that is their birthright, that is their inheritance in all its depth and in all its richness that we enjoy now, but that we will enjoy fully as we overtake that joy and gladness there on the doorstep of Zion.

Of course, in this life, in the here and now, our experience is often one where that joy is mixed with sadness, where that joy is mixed with pain. There's this cocktail of joy and pain that is our present reality. And in that present reality, we often may find ourselves, maybe not to the same extent, to the same degree, but find ourselves echoing the words of Job. Job, in the midst of his pain, in the midst of his loss, in the midst of his suffering, he was still able to declare, using the very language that is used here of the redeemed, I know that my redeemer lives. I can declare that with conviction, even in the midst of the pain and the suffering. But there is a day coming when gladness and joy will overtake us, or when we will overtake gladness and joy, the outcome is the same. When we're overwhelmed by a fullness of joy and of rejoicing, that is what God has in store for us. So, we have this highway, a highway provided by God, a highway provided for us, a highway where God's people enjoy the fruit of their redemption, those things that satisfy our deepest longings, our longing for security, our longing for direction, purpose, our longing for belonging, and our longing for joy and gladness and happiness, all to be found on this way, in the here and now, and in greater and more glorious measure in the future. What is our response? Well, let me suggest very simply that our response can be no other than humble and joyful thanks to the one who has provided such a highway for us, but also a challenge to invite others to join us on this highway, this highway that has been provided, that others who are not on it would join us on it and join us on that highway to Zion. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for this beautiful picture that is painted by God through the prophet of what is the salvation that you have secured for us as your people. We thank you for this way of holiness, this highway that has been provided. We thank you that you are the one who cleanses us and so makes us act to be on that highway and to walk on that way. We thank you for the security that we enjoy. We thank you for the direction that you give us. We thank you for the belonging that is ours to be part of God's people.

We thank you for the joy, the joy that we experience in the here and now and the joy that we will experience in all its fullness in the future. And we thank you for all of these things and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.