

The Geography of Salvation

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

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Isaiah 35:1-10 NIV

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.
Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it;
it will be for those who walk in that Way;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor will any ferocious beast get up on it;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
and the ransomed of the Lord will return.
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.

Since I was a boy I have loved maps and atlases. We had a *Collier's World Atlas* in our home; it was so old it still listed Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany. I spent hours tracing maps of different countries on sheets of thin paper. I was fascinated by the way European boundaries had changed after World War II, and I tried to draw the new boundaries into the maps in the old atlas. I biked all over town collecting road maps from the gas stations, and drove my parents crazy on long trips because every time I spotted a strange brand of gasoline I wanted to stop and get their maps. (That was back in the days when road maps were still free.)

Geography is a subject most junior high students don't care for, but I was fascinated by it. Needless to say, I learned a lot about the world, and about our country. This all came in handy years later when I lost my job as a pastor and had to find other work. I took a job at Rand McNally, coding the U.S. highway network into the computer for use in a product for the motor carrier industry called *MileMaker*. I started as a temporary worker in 1981 and just never bothered to leave. Twenty years later I retired from Rand McNally, but today if you name any city in the U.S. there's a good chance I can tell you where it is, and even what highways run in or near it. (See if you can stump me after church.)

Highways are an important feature of our world's geography. And anyone who's driven those highways knows there are other important features of our landscape — mountains, hills, valleys, plains, deserts, rivers, lakes, seas, cities. During Advent, as we think of how to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord, we remember that prophecy in the Book of Isaiah that the Gospels apply to the preaching of John the Baptist:

*A voice of one calling:
"In the desert prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the wilderness
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all mankind together will see it.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken"* (Isaiah 40:3-5).

Here Isaiah is speaking about the glory of the Lord, as he comes to save and deliver his people. And isn't it interesting that he pictures that salvation using some of the geographic features we've listed: highways, valleys, mountains, deserts, plains. In the Bible, when God shows up his appearance is pictured in terms that might jump off the pages of an atlas. This is what I like to call *the geography of salvation*.

We meet the geography of salvation at many places in the Bible. The sacred writers often use it to portray what the Lord wants to do for his people. We find both rural and urban geography here. Think, for example of those wonderful bucolic images from the Twenty-third Psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside still waters; he restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil;
for thou art with me . . .*

Such peaceful, comforting features of rural geography! Yet urban features also have their place in the geography of salvation. Think of that beautiful picture of the worshiping church we find in the Bible's concluding chapters, where the Lord's dwelling with his people is depicted as a glorious city coming down from heaven, the new Jerusalem:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them . . ." It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:1-3, 12-14).

Today cities can frighten us, with their many problems. Some Protestants and their churches have fled the city for the suburbs and places even further out. But we shouldn't forget that the Bible never abandons the city as a picture of our life with God. In fact, it reaches its climax by focusing on a city in the very center of the geography of salvation.

The geography of salvation forms the background for Isaiah's portrayal of the advent of the Lord, in the Scripture lesson that was read to us this morning from chapter 35. Let's go through that passage and lift up several highlights. He begins with a picture of the desert:

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom (Isaiah 35:1-2).

A desert is a wasteland, a place of dry and barren desolation. I can well remember what a *desert* my life was before the Lord got hold of me. It wasn't much fun living for myself, harboring resentments, lashing out defensively at people whom I believed had wronged me. Placing yourself and your hurts at the center of your concern puts you in a very lonely, desert place. Nothing good can take root and grow there. We keep hoping that the next thing we try will bring us that happiness we desire, but every promising thing that comes along seems to dry up and wither and blow away in the hot, harsh wind of circumstance.

And yet, the desert of our lives is part of the geography of salvation. Before we can come to know the Lord's blessing, we need to acknowledge what a barren place we're in when we don't know him. We may try to convince ourselves that this self-centered life is just fine, but the truth is we're only fabricating a mirage. Some of you, like me, can remember how empty life was before Christ came to you. You thought you were making it in life, getting along okay — then suddenly, one day, you saw what a wasteland your existence really was. And that desert became for you the place where you heard the word of the Lord, and realized that God's advent could renew you and make life worth living.

If we're complacent and self-satisfied, we'll never begin to long for the coming of the Lord, or make ready to meet him. We may have to go into that wilderness where we realize we're lost, and alone, unfruitful and without resources — and only when we reach that point are we ready to meet God. Isaiah said, "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord." Prepare the way by stripping off all pretense of being somebody. Prepare the way by admitting how empty you are. Prepare the way by confessing your sin, and your need for God's mercy. And then receive God's advent promise: "The wilderness will rejoice and blossom, it will burst into bloom. Be strong, do not fear; your God will come to save you."

As Isaiah proceeds through his vision of the advent of the Lord, he begins to shift his geographic references. The features of the dry wilderness begin to give way to what mapmakers call *hydrography* — the representation of the water features of the earth: rivers, lakes, ponds.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs (Isaiah 35:6-7).

When we meet God, the barrenness of our world begins to be nourished by the life-giving waters of his presence. You and I have seen it in the lives of people we know, and in our own. When I first met Sandy (not her real name) she was in a desert place. I was a pastor in a small Illinois community, and when I would visit parishioners in a nearby city hospital I would try to call on other people from our town that happened to be there. One of them was Sandy; she was an immigrant from Scotland who had married Tom (again, not his real name), a local Illinois man. But there had been violence in the home and that's why Sandy was in the hospital. We prayed with Sandy to receive Christ, and my wife told her to begin praising the Lord. Incredibly, Sandy immediately began to say, "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord!" in her Scottish brogue. From that day on she changed. She had to leave Tom, but a few years later he also came to the Lord and they were remarried. They went off to Bible school and returned to begin a ministry together. I wish I could say they lived happily ever after, but life isn't like that, is it? Tom fell away from the Lord, and he and Sandy were divorced again. But Sandy didn't give up on God. She became burdened about spreading the good news of Christ to her native Scotland — which is truly a desert place spiritually — and started a mission to take the gospel there. I've lost touch with Sandy, but as far as I know she's still serving the Lord. When Jesus comes into your life, he creates "streams in the desert."

Through desert, then streams, Isaiah next carries the geography of salvation into the realm of transportation:

And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. . . . But only the redeemed will walk there (Isaiah 35:8-9).

As I mentioned, I spent many years working with highway information. In North America there are all types of roads, from nearly impassible dirt trails all the way up to the finest and fastest superhighways. These roads take you to many places, including some places you might not really want to get to, like Last Chance, Colorado, or Devil's Lake, North Dakota, or Death Valley, California. But Isaiah's talking about one special highway: the Way of Holiness. We aren't going to meet the Lord on just any old road. People say there are many roads to heaven, or that all religious roads go to the same place, but that isn't true. The Bible says there's only one way to God: "I am the Way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

The way of preparation for the Lord's coming is the Way of Holiness. It's a way of separating ourselves from all that would hinder our response to the advent of God. That's what "holiness" means: separation for the Lord. To prepare ourselves for his coming we may have to clear the road for him. I know people who consider themselves Christians, and who admit they need God's help, but their lives are cluttered with things that hinder his working in them. It may be a career that demands their entire preoccupation. It may be a hunger for the latest technical gadgetry or home improvement. It may be an excessive concern with hobbies, or sports. It may be a fixation with computer games, or immersion in TV programs, videos or DVDs promoting a non-Christian perspective and filled with illicit sex and crude and vulgar language. When the Lord's highway into our lives, and our highway into his presence, is blocked up with these things, there's little prospect that he will meet us at our point of need. We have to clear the way for his coming. We have to travel the Way of Holiness.

To travel along that Way, we need a good road map. I know the difference between a good map and a bad one. When Shirley and I travel, we sometimes like to take the back roads — the "scenic route," as people call it. But to do that, you need a good map showing the local roads. We keep a state road atlas in our car to help us find these roads less traveled. More than once we've had to turn around and go back the way we came because the road the map said was there wasn't there any more. (By the way, it's a competitor's map, not Rand McNally's.) It's vital to have an accurate and complete map as we seek to travel the Way of Holiness, the Way that leads to the presence of God. Says the Psalmist, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). As we look for the coming of the Lord, the Bible is our road map pointing us in the right direction. And Scripture points us to Jesus, who is "the way, the truth and the life."

From desert to streams to the highway, Isaiah's atlas of the geography of salvation leads us, finally, into the mountain of the presence of the Lord:

The ransomed of the Lord will return. 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 (Isaiah 35:10).

The geography of salvation culminates in Zion, the holy mountain of worship and praise. It will do you no good to cry out for help in your desert of need, to refresh yourself from the Lord's life-giving streams, to travel the highway of holiness toward his presence — it will do you no good if you aren't prepared to welcome his coming, and celebrate his majesty, with the praises of Zion — that free-flowing, joyous abandon of self as you release your worship and adoration before him! As Psalm 65 says, "Praise is due to thee, O God, in Zion" (Psalm 65:1). Heartfelt, enthusiastic praise is the tribute we offer our King as we pledge our loyalty to the covenant he has graciously granted us in Christ. You can't come into God's presence and sit on your hands. Brothers and sisters, praise has changed my life, and I try to model it for you when we worship together, lifting my hands before the Lord as we sing adoringly before him. And I just pray that some of it will catch on here, before I complete my term of duty as your interim minister. Let gladness and joy overtake us — that sorrow and sighing may flee away!

I can't leave this discussion of the geography of salvation without turning to one more passage of Scripture, from chapter 47 of the prophecy of Ezekiel. It's a magnificent vision of what the church needs to be, portrayed in geographic terms:

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple; and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east . . .; and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.

Then he brought me out by way of the north gate, and led me round on the outside to the outer gate, that faces toward the east; and the water was coming out on the south side. Going on eastward with a line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water; and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water; and it was up to the loins. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen; it was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through.

And he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he led me back along the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah; and when it enters the stagnant waters of the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. . . .

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing (Ezekiel 47:1-9, 12).

Do you catch the prophet's vision? There's no river in the earthly Jerusalem. This is a vision for the healing of the world through the life-giving streams that flow from the place of worship, the altar of God! It's a vision that returns at the very end of the Bible, in the Revelation to John:

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

From the place of praise and worship — from Zion, the church of Jesus Christ — flows the healing presence of the Lord, transforming the withered, barren, lifeless geography of this world into the *geography of salvation*. It's our mission to prepare ourselves for the Lord's coming, and as he comes and we meet him, to let the glory of his presence spill over into the lives of others, flowing like a stream until "gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

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