

TCC Sunday 3rd August 2014 – Shaped in God’s mould – Hopefulness & Holiness – Isaiah 35

Title: “Shaped in God’s mould – Hopefulness & Holiness”

Purpose: For people to understand that God’s word should be a powerful shaping influence.

We will be shaped: 1) by way of hopefulness and 2) by way of holiness.

INTRODUCTION

Show cake mould and explain that just as cakes can be shaped into amazing shapes by way of modern silica cake moulds so we too are shaped by many things in our environments.

This is all the more true when we come to ultimate things that we meet in Scripture. This is especially true today with [Isaiah chapter 35](#).

Getting our bearings

Just so we can get our bearings: two weeks ago, we were in [Isaiah 33](#) and this was very 11th hour situation for God’s people – and we were learning that even at the 11th hour, God still looks for His people to return to Him and to show compassion.

[Chapter 33](#) was the last of the 6 woes and that woe was directed not at God’s people but at the enemy at the Assyrians.

Now as we come to [Chapters 34 & 35](#) we find that they COMPLEMENT each other (*not* COMPLIMENT) in that BOTH speak of ULTIMATE and FINAL ISSUES:

- [Isaiah 34](#) speaks of God’s anger and His wrath which is coming against the nations.

We read in [Verse 5](#) we read of Edom: “My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see, it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed.”

And in case we are not quite getting the scale of things – let me read on into [Verses 8-10](#):
“For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause. Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulphur; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.”

Now you might well ask: Q. So why is God singling out Edom?

And that’s a good question – perhaps if you can remember back some while to when we looked at [Chapters 13-23](#) – 11 chapters in total and we just took them as a single block because the first of those chapters spoke about **Babylon** who was representative of the nations as a world system set up as an alternative to God’s way.

Here too it is similar – God is, through His prophet Isaiah addressing all the nations but **Edom** represented every other nation and people that were **at ENMITY with God**.

Edom was that nation that arose from the line of **Esau, Jacob's** older brother, and so they represent a people that from the very outset had been jostling and fighting against God's people and God's way represented in Jacob whom God later renamed as **Israel** (Genesis 32).

- By comparison – **Isaiah 35** is **the complete reverse** – it is **not** ULTIMATE JUDGMENT but instead ULTIMATE DELIVERANCE.

So **Chapter 34** – is the story of everyone who buys into and invests in this present world, its values, desires and pursuits.

And **Chapter 35** – is the story of everyone who instead banks everything on God and His purposes and His version of events.

This morning

Well that has given you a feel for the chapters that are around about and will help us to better appreciate the section that we are looking at this morning which is Isaiah 35.

And it would have to be said that what we have here are some remarkably sweet verses.

Again and again we read of JOY and REJOICING, we GLORY and MAJESTY, of WILDERNESSES bursting into BLOOM and of a WONDERFUL WAY that leads the REDEEMED back to ZION.

And this chapter really is something of an OASIS because we have had quite a lot of woes recently and also because the next 4 chapters are have their fair share of difficulty.

This is the way one person put it:

“The glory of this chapter (that is chapter 35) is enhanced, if that is possible. It is a real oasis between the visionary wasteland of chapter 34 and the history of war, sickness and folly that follow in chapters 36-39.”

Structure

We have just 10 verses before us and I want to divide them into two:

- FIRST – What I am going to call “STRIKING HOPEFULNESS” Verses 1 thru to 6 (and the first part i.e. 1-6a)
- SECOND – “STEADFAST HOLINESS” Verses 6b thru to the end

Now, life for many of us can be remarkably draining and many canny business people have opened up a pretty large niche in the market selling all manner of high energy drinks ranging from your kind of Red Bull caffeine ones to those along the lines of a Lucozade glucose shot.

And Verse 3&4 right in the middle of our first section helps us to see that the Word of God addresses this reality for us at a spiritual level. Time and again, Scripture is very honest about the fact that the environment of this world is very draining and is very hard work to live in for any of us that would describe ourselves as Christian believers.

The apostle Paul said to the believers at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch:

“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” (Acts 14 Verse 22)

The apostle Peter said to the Christians he wrote to:

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4 Verses 12-13)

An imperative in the centre

Now let me just say a word about IMPERATIVES and INDICATIVES.

(And I must confess that I have never been very good at grammar, but I have learned a lot more over the past few years just by chipping away at it.)

Let me **define my terms** – because they are not really as complicated as they sound:

- **an IMPERATIVE** is typically a **positive or negative COMMAND or REQUEST** (a realis mood)
e.g. as in Verse 4 – “Be strong, do not fear...”
- **an INDICATIVE** is simply another grammatical mood (irrealis) which shows that **what is being talked about is something that is a FACT**

e.g. Verse 8 “A highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness”

And both of these issue a clear call for us to RESPOND.

A question that we are always good to be asking ourselves on a reasonably regular basis is:

Q. Just how responsive am I? (And we were thinking about this earlier on with different people responding to Jesus in those various settings in John chapter 4).

So #1:

1] “STRIKING HOPEFULNESS” – Verses 1-6a

The IMPERATIVE

So for this first section we are going to look at an important IMPERATIVE and then in the second half we are going to pick up upon an equally important INDICATIVE.

Now the **COMMAND, the IMPERATIVE** comes in the middle part of [Verses 1-6a](#) – it is there in [Verses 3&4](#) – so let me read them:

[Isaiah 35 verses 3-4](#) “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.”

There are clearly different ways in which we can look upon COMMANDS or IMPERATIVES:

- we can see them as “**THINGS TO BE OBEYED**” – we do them sure enough but quite possibly we do them with a bit of RESIGNATION or RELUCTANCE.
- we can see them as “**THINGS UTTERED BY A DICTATOR**” – we do them because we feel we don’t have much choice, but we do them with an attitude of RESENTMENT.
- we can see them as “**THINGS SAID TO SPUR US ON**” – and here the attitude is again quite different – they are still COMMANDS/IMPERATIVES but the way we receive them is along the lines of needed encouragement, they provide for us necessary motivation.

Q. So which way are we to see these verses?

Well we can actually draw on other parts of Scripture to help us be clear about that – so let me take you to two places – one in the OT and then one in the NT:

OT – Joshua chapter 1

Perhaps you remember Joshua – he was the one who followed on from Moses as leader of the people of Israel – he was the one who was to stand in Moses shoes – I would imagine that that was a pretty daunting task given the stature of Moses.

So when he is about to begin this new job and to actually take over – this is what we read in [Joshua Chapter 1](#) – we see that uses the very same words and general language that turns up here in [Isaiah 35 and Verse 4](#).

[Joshua 1 verses 6&7](#) “Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous...etc .etc.”

It is just what he needs to hear, it is inspiring and it fills him with a fresh attitude of HOPEFULNESS despite many things which might speak in a contrary direction.

Let’s head to the NT:

NT – Hebrews chapter 12

Let me read a few verses there:

Hebrews 12 verses 4-7a “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons...”

and then it goes on in Verse 12 to conclude the point that he is making by making reference back to Verse 3 in Isaiah 35:

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees...”

Always drawing strength

We are a people who are always in the business of drawing strength from God’s ENCOURAGING EXHORTATION from His INSPIRING IMPERATIVE.

A command buttressed

Now just simply telling someone to be strong is not really very helpful if you don’t tell them on what they are to base their confidence.

That word confidence comes from the Latin words CON which means “WITH” and FIDES which means FAITH. And FAITH has to rest upon something otherwise it is just blind faith which is no better than presumption.

And this is where Verses 1&2 and Verses 5&6 come in because they give a couple of sets of tremendous support as to why we should be marked by an IRREPRESSIBLE HOPEFULLNESS.

Verses 1-2

Ok – let me read these opening 2 verses:

Verses 1-2 “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 splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God. “

We see here the picture of the dawning of a new day – a day full of promise and of potential.

If you were to look at the spires of many churches in and around Europe you would see not crosses but roosters that top them.

These are a carryover from the time of the Protestant Reformation that took place in the 1500’s in Europe

by way of people like Martin Luther and John Calvin.

The general idea seemed to reflect, at least in part, that a new day had dawned and the replacement of the cross on RC churches with the Rooster on those churches identifying themselves as Protestant – was a way of reminding people of this new dawn.

(I should say that there are other important symbolisms there as well – such as Peter having that AHA MOMENT when the cock crowed realising that he was going in the wrong direction effectively denying Christ).

And the first reason that we have for being SURPRISING IN HOPEFULNESS is that we are clear that a new day is on its way, a new day is going to dawn.

CHANGE - This is what God does

As Christians we recognise that **God changes things**.

It is part of God's signature that He takes the desert places, the parched land and makes it burst into bloom.

When God does this He displays His own glory and splendour.

(We see this same thing in Psalm 107 in the end section – it shows us how God reverses situations EITHER to bring people down – because they need humbling OR to raise people up because they are evidencing a godly humility).

So: Q. Is this your God?

Verses 5&6a

The second basis for our **STRIKING HOPEFULNESS** – is there in Verse 5 and the first half of Verse 6 – let me read them:

Verse 5&6a "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."

4 categories of afflicted people here – and all of them will know release by way of God's plan and ultimate purpose.

Q. Do you remember John the Baptist?

He was put in prison by Herod and after some while he sends some of his disciples to see Jesus to gain reassurance. He asks "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" – it is an understandable question from one beaten down and locked away in dingy cell.

But notice the words Jesus uses to strengthen and encourage him:

Luke 7 verse 22 "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the

lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.”

These words combine a number of verses in Isaiah and as you can easily see one of those sets of verses is what we have here before us.

Summing up

We are being given reasons why we can – in fact – why we should – be thoroughly SUPRISING IN HOPEFULNESS as Christians because our God is an active God.

As we began our evening service last Sunday:

“Our God is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or even imagine according to his power that is at work within us.”

As Verse 4 states very specifically – following the INSPIRING IMPERATIVE:

(Verse 4) “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”

Q. Is this just pie in the sky when you die?

No! We empirically get to taste and see that our God is good through all of our lives – so although there is inevitably some aspect of “Pie in the sky when you die” there is just as much “Steak on your plate while you wait!” as well.

Let’s move on to our second part – what I’m calling #2:

2] “STEADFAST HOLINESS” – Verses 6b-10

And as I said earlier on this part has at its core, at its centre:

- ***NOT*** an INSPIRING IMPERATIVE
- ***BUT*** rather an INESCAPABLE INDICATIVE

Q. Now what did you say an **INDICATIVE** was again?

An indicative is that mood in grammar where:

- something is being stated as **A REALITY**,
- something is being spoken of as **A MATTER OF FACT**.

See it there in Verse 8:

(Verse 8) “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.”

A Highway & The Way

The idea of a highway is one that has some prominence in Isaiah – the very commissioning words of John the Baptist come to mind taken from Isaiah 40 and Verse 3:

“A voice of one calling:

‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness **A HIGHWAY for our God.**”

And this idea is one that gets picked up very early in the NT as well – to be a Christian meant that you were known as a **follower of THE WAY**.

Jesus himself said:

(John 14 Verse 6) “I am **the WAY**, the TRUTH and the LIFE, no one comes to the Father except through me.”

And although this WAY has various different aspects to it – here in Isaiah it is very peculiarly and very particularly a HIGHWAY OF HOLINESS.

One of Isaiah’s favourite TITLES for God is the “HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL”.

Exclusive and inclusive

This road is at a level BOTH exclusive and inclusive – there are those that are shown to be not upon this road, upon this highway.

As Verse 8 says “The unclean will *not* journey on it;...”

And I think it is worth pointing out that although this road is described as a HIGHWAY here in Isaiah 35 – that does *not* automatically make it a MOTORWAY!!

Remember Jesus’ description, in the Sermon on the Mount (there in Matthew 7), of the broad way and the narrow way:

Matthew 7 verse 13-14 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. “

Holiness is one attribute that the world finds STRANGE and largely INEXPLICABLE.

The Redeemed/The Ransomed

Q. So who walks on this road?

Well our passage gives us a couple of answers:

- **FIRSTLY** – Verse 9-10 “But only the redeemed will walk there and the ransomed of the LORD will

return...”

Those that are redeemed are those who have been delivered, those who have known the wonderful release and exodus from the power and the penalty of their sins.

The mention of ransom reminds us that this was achieved at immeasurable cost to the one who became the ransom on our behalf. The Lord Jesus Christ.

- **SECONDLY** – those who walk on that way, that **HIGHWAY OF HOLINESS** – are those who have chosen to do so.

End of Verse 8 – “it will be for those who walk in that Way.”

The way of holiness is one that all Christians – and I do not include those that are Christian in name only – this is one way in which nominal and actual Christians are distinguished – all true Christians will be found upon this road.

It doesn’t make true Christians perfect in this life – but it does place them fairly and squarely upon the road and **HIGHWAY OF HOLINESS**.

Fleshing it out a bit

Because holiness is a notion that seems rather foreign even to Christians let me clarify it a little by giving you a few things that **HOLINESS** is **not** and then a few more things that **HOLINESS** is:

(**Kevin DeYoung**) – And I’m going to be borrowing some headings here from **Kevin DeYoung** and his recent book “**The Hole in your Holiness**”)

WHAT IT’S *NOT*:

- **1] HOLINESS IS *NOT* MERE RULE KEEPING** – while holiness is not less than obeying commands it is whole lot more than just that. After all the Pharisees did a lot of rule-keeping but this did not make them properly holy.

We can easily turn walking on the **HIGHWAY OF HOLINESS** into a case of what you might call “Sanctification-by-checklist” – holiness is much more than just a bit of ethical refurbishment.

Jesus never preached a gospel message that centred on morality and our ability to raise our game to some sort of middle-class definition of moral decency.

- **2] HOLINESS IS *NOT* GENERATIONAL IMITATION** – it is easy to be a bit misguided or idealistic about former generations and equate what they did as the perfect standard of holiness and so if we imitate them we become ourselves by definition holy.

So perhaps we think that the Puritans or the Reformers in previous centuries had it sussed and so we try and ape them – whilst we conveniently forget that they too had their blindspots and lived in a very different day and age.

- **3] HOLINESS IS *NOT* MERE SPIRITUALITY** – it might sound inspiring to say that “I’m spiritual, not religious!” but this can often be nothing more than a clever way of saying that I am much more open to things more vague such as mystery, healing and inner peace.

As **RC Sproul** said in his book on Holiness: “Many people have spoken to me about being ethical, moral, spiritual, or even pious. But nobody seems to want to talk about being righteous.”

- **4] HOLINESS IS *NOT* “FINDING YOUR TRUE SELF”** – it is currently a popular idea that “the truly good person is the one who has learned to be true to himself.”

The idea that there is a good person in all of us and we just have to lock onto that good person somehow – is **not** the gospel – because if that was true, then Jesus did not need to come and die in our place to pay the price for our sins.

Q. So what then is HOLINESS – at least as the bible talks about it?

WHAT HOLINESS IS:

- **1] HOLINESS LOOKS LIKE A LIFE MARKED BY VIRTUE AND NOT BY VICE** – now I don’t have time here to unpack that in any detail – so how can you yourself do that exercise – well it is pretty easy actually because the NT in numerous places gives us lists of both VICIES and VIRTUES and often these are placed side by side so that we can see the contrast.

So head over to places like Galatians chapter 5; Colossians chapter 3 or Romans chapters 12&13 just to get you started.

- **2] HOLINESS LOOKS LIKE A CLEAN CONSCIENCE** – the fact is that we don’t tend to think about our conscience as much as we probably should.

We know that the blood of Christ has cleansed our consciences – and we are declared justified before God.

However we do not cease sinning and Romans 2 verse 15 reminds us that our conscience continues to either **accuse** us OR **excuse** us. The apostle Paul is busy working on his conscience:

Acts 24 verse 16 “So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and men.”

Because our consciences can be seared, can be defiled, can be silenced and need to be informed and nurtured – then this is one tell-tale sign of practical holiness.

- **3] HOLINESS LOOKS LIKE OBEDIENCE TO GOD’S COMMANDS** – as DeYoung says: “It sounds really spiritual to say God is interested in a relationship, not in rules. But it’s not

biblical. From top to bottom the Bible is full of commands. They aren't meant to stifle a relationship with God, but to protect it, seal it, and define it.

Never forget: first God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, then he gave them the law. God's people were not redeemed by observing the law, but they were redeemed so they might obey the law.

"By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments"

- **4] HOLINESS LOOKS LIKE CHRISTLIKENESS** – as Romans 8 verse 29 informs us – the goal of the gospel is that we should be transformed into the image of God's son – Jesus Christ.

DeYoung goes on:

"We see in Jesus the best, most practical, most human example of what it means to be holy. He is our model for **love** (John 13:34), our model for **humility** (Phil. 2:5–8), our model for **facing temptation** (Heb. 4:15), our model for **steadfastness in the midst of suffering** (1 Pet. 4:1–2), and our model for **obedience to the Father** (John 6:38; 14:31).

We see all the virtues of holiness perfectly aligned in Christ."

We could say a lot more but let me conclude:

CONCLUSION

So then in the light of both of these IMPERATIVES and INDICATIVE here in this chapter of ultimate things – we see that God want us to be responsive people and He deliberately wants us to take a certain and clear shape:

- Allow yourself to become STRIKING in your HOPEFULNESS
- & allow yourself to be evermore STEADFAST in your HOLINESS

So that God may have all the glory and that you may have all His joy.

In Jesus name

AMEN