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Prayer:

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Old Testament: Isaiah 35:1-10

Context: Isaiah proclaims a future where God transforms despair into joy, restoring His people and renewing all creation.

THE RETURN OF THE REDEEMED TO ZION

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and shouting.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp;
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;



they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 35:1-10 is a beautiful, hope-filled vision of God's final restoration. After chapters describing judgment, this chapter bursts onto the scene with imagery of deserts blooming, the weak strengthened, and a "Holy Way" on which God's redeemed people return home singing. It is a promise that God will not abandon His people to despair; instead, He will usher in renewal, healing, joy, and safe passage into a restored relationship with Him. The text blends physical transformation (deserts, wilderness, springs of water) with spiritual renewal (courage, healing, redemption). Ultimately, Isaiah 35 assures the people that God's future triumph will reverse the effects of suffering, oppression, exile, and fear.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Isaiah 35 stands in deliberate contrast to Isaiah 34. While chapter 34 warns of divine judgment upon the nations that oppose God, chapter 35 shows what God will do for His faithful remnant. Here we have a pattern common in prophetic literature: judgment and hope; destruction and renewal. Isaiah was addressing a people living under threat from Assyria, experiencing political instability, moral decline, and spiritual uncertainty. He paints a picture of God's ultimate restoration—not only from military oppression or exile but from the brokenness of the world itself.

The chapter's themes resonate broadly across Scripture:

- Exodus language: God leading His people through the wilderness.
- Messianic signals: The blind see, the lame walk (referenced by Jesus in Matthew 11:5).
- Eschatological hope: Echoes of Revelation 21–22, where all sorrow is wiped away and creation is renewed.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Isaiah prophesied during the 8th century BC, a turbulent period in the ancient Near East. The Assyrian Empire was aggressively expanding, devouring smaller nations like Israel (the northern kingdom), and threatening Judah (the southern kingdom). Economic inequality, corrupt leadership, and religious unfaithfulness characterized the time. People feared for their safety, their future, and their identity.

The imagery of deserts blooming is not merely poetic—much of Judah's surrounding landscape was harsh, dry, and vulnerable to enemy movement. A restored, flourishing land symbolized political stability, divine protection, and national revival.

On a political level, Isaiah 35 functions as a bold declaration that the empires of the world (such as Assyria and later Babylon) do not have the final word. God alone determines the future of His people. Isaiah is not merely comforting; he is *defiant*. He proclaims hope in the face of geopolitical despair.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **740–700 BC (Approx.)**
Isaiah's prophetic ministry overlaps the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah.
- **722 BC**
Northern Kingdom falls to Assyria. Judah sees the writing on the wall.
- **701 BC**
Assyria invades Judah, capturing cities and threatening Jerusalem.



- **Post-701 BC**

Isaiah continues speaking of judgment and hope: the remnant will survive, and God will bring restoration.

- **Isaiah 35** likely emerges during or after this period of intense fear and uncertainty, offering a vision that stretches beyond political rescue and points toward spiritual and ultimate restoration.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Scholars often read Isaiah 35 metaphorically as a description of *inner transformation* and *societal renewal*. The blooming desert represents the human soul restored by God's presence. The healing of the blind and lame symbolizes the removal of spiritual barriers. *The "Holy Way" is not just a path home from exile but the life-pattern of people aligned with God's justice, mercy, and joy.*

Modern Connection:

In our time—especially in a community like Grant County—people experience “deserts” of their own:

- shrinking economic opportunities
- addiction struggles
- loneliness and social fragmentation
- fear of change or decline
- grief, illness, or uncertainty about the future

Isaiah 35 speaks directly into those places. God's renewal does not require ideal conditions; it begins in the most barren places. A blooming wilderness is an image of God transforming what seemed hopeless—families restored, courage rekindled, churches revitalized, relationships mended, and communities discovering new life.

The “Holy Way” has meaning too: it is a path where people choose grace over cynicism, compassion over suspicion, and hope over fatalism. In a county often divided by politics, generational differences, or socioeconomic lines, Isaiah's vision invites residents to see themselves as travelers on the same God-shaped road—redeemed people learning how to walk together.

The promise of “everlasting joy” need not be limited to heaven. It begins whenever a community acts with dignity, justice, and love that reflect God's character.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Let hope interrupt despair.**

Isaiah 35 reminds us that God brings renewal even when circumstances look barren. *We should speak and live hope, not resignation.*

- **Strengthen the weak hands and fearful hearts.**

The passage literally tells us to do this. In today's terms: encourage those who feel overwhelmed, marginalized, or worn out. *Lift someone else's spirit.*

- **Participate in God's restoration.**

Whether through kindness, justice work, service, or simply showing up for those in need, we walk the “Holy Way” when our actions reflect God's renewing love.



- **Recognize healing in its many forms.**

Healing may be physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual. Isaiah's vision encourages us to notice and celebrate every sign of renewal.

- **Be a presence of joy.**

The redeemed return home "singing." In a world full of anxiety and negativity, Christians can embody joy—not superficial happiness, but deep assurance that God is at work.

- **Build community that reflects God's vision.**

In Grant County or anywhere else, Christians can create pockets of flourishing—relationships, ministries, gardens, volunteer efforts, support groups, acts of generosity—that resemble God's desert blooming.

Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

Context: Jesus responds to John Baptist's doubts

MESSENGERS FROM JOHN THE BAPTIST

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

JESUS PRAISES JOHN THE BAPTIST

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John:

"What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."*

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

OVERVIEW

Matthew 11:2-11 captures a moment of profound tension: John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod Antipas, sends messengers to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus answers not with a direct "yes" or "no," but by pointing to the evidence—healing the blind, lifting up the poor, restoring the broken, and fulfilling Isaiah's prophetic vision. Jesus then shifts his focus to the crowds, affirming John's prophetic greatness while also revealing something startling: even the least in God's coming kingdom will surpass John, because they will live on the far side of Jesus' redemptive work.



This passage highlights a transition—from expectation to fulfillment, from prophetic anticipation to the arrival of God’s reign in everyday human lives.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Matthew 11 takes place after John has already prepared the way (Matthew 3) and after Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing has gained momentum. Yet even John the Baptist, the great herald of the Messiah, struggles with unmet expectations. John preached fiery judgment and moral purification; Jesus is demonstrating mercy, healing, and restoration. John wanted righteousness to arrive like a hammer. Jesus brings righteousness like a physician—mending before judging.

John’s doubt is not faithlessness but confusion: he envisioned a Messiah who would confront political oppression and purge corruption. Jesus’ response reminds the reader that God’s kingdom arrives first as compassion before it arrives as consummation.

Jesus’ praise of John—“among those born of women no one has arisen greater”—elevates John’s role while also signaling a shift: John belongs to the old age of anticipation; Jesus ushers in the new age of fulfillment.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

John is imprisoned by **Herod Antipas**, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, for publicly criticizing Herod’s marriage to Herodias. Prisons were not correctional institutions but holding cells for political threats. John is effectively silenced for speaking truth to power.

Politically, Judea and Galilee are under Roman influence, fragmented into client kingdoms. Messianic expectations were highly charged, often tied to hopes of political liberation. Many expected the Messiah to topple oppressive rulers, not merely heal the sick.

Religiously, the Pharisees and Sadducees debated purity, temple authority, and interpretation of the law. John operated outside these structures—calling all, elite and commoner alike, to repentance at the Jordan. Jesus’ works among society’s least—rather than among political elites or military leaders—did not match popular revolutionary hopes.

Jesus’ answer to John reframes Messiahship: liberation begins with human wholeness, not regime change.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **Late 20s AD** – John’s public ministry peaks, baptizing crowds, including Jesus.
- **Around 28–29 AD** – Jesus begins his Galilean ministry after John’s arrest.
- **John Imprisoned** – Likely in Machaerus, a desert fortress east of the Dead Sea.
- **Matthew 11 Occurs** – During Jesus’ early-to-mid public activity, before opposition intensifies in chapters 12–13.
- **John’s Death** – A short time later (Matthew 14), killed by Herod.

This timeline places Matthew 11 at a hinge moment: John’s ministry is ending; Jesus’ mission is accelerating.



SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Metaphorically, John represents the **faithful person who did everything right but still finds himself in a place of confinement—physical, emotional, or spiritual**. He expected God to act in a certain way, but God's unfolding story looked different.

Jesus' response suggests: *When we question, look at the fruits of compassion, healing, justice, and restoration—there you will find God.*

In a Grant County context, this metaphor speaks directly to everyday frustrations:

- We expect big solutions to homelessness, addiction, poverty, and decline in local news or local community engagement. We want sweeping fixes—new laws, new leaders, big money.
- **But Jesus points instead toward small restorations: a person fed, a neighbor comforted, a veteran housed, a broken relationship mended, a child given opportunity.**
- The kingdom shows up in **cancer support groups**, community gardens, YMCA outreach, mentoring programs, city cleanups, neighborhood associations—places where people quietly rebuild what is broken.

John expected a dramatic Messiah; Jesus revealed a transforming presence already at work in the margins.

Metaphorically, Jesus is saying:

If you want to know where God is, look not at the headlines but at the healing.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Embrace honest doubt.**
John asked his question openly. Doubt is not spiritual failure—it's a doorway to deeper understanding.
- **Examine the evidence of God's work.**
Jesus pointed to what was *happening*, not to what was being *promised*. Likewise, we should look for God in acts of compassion rather than rhetoric (the art of persuasive speaking) or ideology (typically referred to as political or economic policies).
- **Expect God to act differently than we imagine.**
Jesus challenged John's—and our—expectations. ***God may not bring change through the dramatic or political but through steady acts of mercy.***
- **Honor those who prepare the way.**
Jesus praises John even as he shifts the mission's direction. In our lives, this means respecting the people who till the soil we now cultivate—pastors, teachers, volunteers, civic leaders, and quiet saints who shaped the community long before us.
- **Participate in the kingdom by doing concrete good.**
Jesus' list—healing, welcoming, lifting up—reminds us that the kingdom is ***not an idea but a practice.***



Addendum:

Comparative Analysis of Isaiah 35:1–10 and Matthew 11:2–11

1. Core Connection

Isaiah 35 promises that when God’s salvation comes, the blind will see, the lame will walk, and joy will replace sorrow.

In Matthew 11, Jesus points to these exact signs to assure John the Baptist that the promised restoration has begun.

Isaiah predicts the renewal.

Jesus embodies it.

2. Shared Message to People in Distress

Isaiah’s audience faced invasion, fear, and despair.

John the Baptist sat in prison, uncertain whether God’s plan was unfolding.

Both passages declare: **God is not finished. The barren places are not the end of the story.**

3. Theological Parallels (Short and Direct)

- **Reversal of brokenness:**

Isaiah describes deserts blooming; Jesus restores broken lives.

- **Healing as a sign of God’s kingdom:**

Isaiah lists the blind, deaf, and lame; Jesus performs these acts.

- **A new path for God’s people:**

Isaiah speaks of a “Holy Way”; John prepares “the way” for Jesus.

4. Correcting Expectations

John expected a fiery Messiah.

Jesus shows that God’s restoration begins with healing, not judgment.

This is important for churches shaped by fire-and-brimstone preaching:

Jesus responds to doubt with compassion, not condemnation.

5. Metaphorical & Grant County Lens

Both texts use “barren landscapes” as symbols of human struggle.

Isaiah says God makes deserts bloom.

Jesus says, “Look around — it’s already starting.”

Even small signs of renewal in Grant County—restored relationships, community efforts, acts of compassion—are modern echoes of these passages.

6. How These Texts Shape Christian Living

Live with hope, not resignation.

- Encourage the weak and fearful.
- Recognize God’s work in ordinary places.
- Answer doubt gently, as Jesus did with John.
- Walk the “Holy Way” by choosing compassion, patience, and joy.