

Isaiah 35:1-10 Joy! Disabilities Fit in the Church #2 Falls Church AM
11/14/21

Isaiah chapter 35 belongs together with chapter 34 – Isaiah presented a contrast of reversals. In chapter 34, the rich and beautiful nation of Edom became a desert. Meanwhile, in chapter 35, a desert suddenly bloomed with rich beauty. **In Christ, we are called to suffer redemptively, learning to rejoice.**

In verse 1, the desert will rejoice, when cactus blooms a beautiful flower.

In verse 2, many colorful flowers uplifted them. Who can take a desert and fill it with flowers? The LORD.

Verse 3 - the desert was human weakness, and the flowers were God's strength living in us.

In verse 4, God told Isaiah what to say to the hearts of people who are anxious. What? BE STRONG! God says, "FEAR NOT!"

In verses 5 and 6 – blind will see, deaf will hear, lame will jump up and down, the mute will sing for joy, just like waters and streams in the wilderness. God can take miserable people, and turn us into joyful singers.

Change. Reversal. Christ brought overturning of our situation. Yes, Christ in his later earthly ministry literally healed blind, deaf, lame, and mute, but those were object lessons to show us the power of spiritual change. People blinded by sin can see The LORD. People deaf to God, can hear the Word of the LORD. People lame can walk in the pathway of God. People who have nothing good to say, become people who gush with joy and songs.

In verse 7, we get the picture of water in the desert.

In verse 8, we get the picture of a road being built – a highway for transportation. Not a worn footpath, but a real roadway.

What else do we know about this highway? It is labeled "Way of Holiness" It is the way to the Holy City.

In verse 9, we learn that the Holy One of Israel has removed threats on this highway – no lions, no beasts, no dangerous animals. It is safe.

In Isaiah's picture, the world is a desert, and God built us a highway out of it. Verse 10 calls for singing and for sorrow to flee away.

In Jesus's picture, the world is troubled, and God will get us through this, and bring us home to heaven. Jesus taught us in John 16:33, "*In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*"

John 15:11, "*These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*" Isaiah taught a Highway of holiness, Jesus taught

fullness of joy. So how do we rejoice? Let the sorrowing flee away! Joy is a gift. As we travel the Highway of Holiness, we remember that our sins required our death. God the Father wanted to give us life instead, so God the Father sent His Son to die that death for us. God bought us back from death! We learn to rejoice!

1. Refining our character. 1 Tim. 1:15-20 and Heb. 12:15

We have a solid theological framework to understand God's sovereignty over the suffering of disabilities.

God calls us to suffer redemptively. We rest in Christ, while praying boldly to the Father to intervene on behalf of the suffering and their caregivers.

What does the Bible say about healing? First, that God hates suffering. However that does not mean that God will always heal disabilities to relieve the suffering involved. Some people think that is the role of Christ our Savior, but it is not the role of Savior.

We understand the true reason why Jesus came was not to heal sick people, but to save sinful people. Listen to 1 Timothy 1:15-20, "*...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*"

Christ came to save sinners, not to heal. In this passage, Paul is concerned for people to hold on to their faith, and to avoid shipwrecking their faith.

One danger of shipwrecking faith comes when churches misrepresent why Jesus came. People with disabilities can be drawn to churches that say the reason Jesus came was to relieve all suffering, and to heal all disease. Such churches invite people with disabilities to come to a special service for miraculous healing. So, the people come in wheelchairs, with white canes for blindness, and with walkers for other disabilities. Relief from pain and suffering is offered. All that seems to be required is faith on the part of the person with a disability. Later, when the people leave without a healing, they feel the heavy weight of being accused of not having enough faith. Consequently, the little faith that they had is shipwrecked.

God gives faith to overcome human suffering not by destroying faith, but rather by building up faith and by building up godly character. God is a God of compassion, and so the church is a church of compassion.

The church is not embarrassed by disabilities. We do not say that something is wrong with the faith of a believer with a disability or another struggle, such as mental health. We do not blame or shame people, saying that the problem is them, for lack of faith.

Hebrews 12:15, we are urged, “*see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God...*” Suffering is often the tool in God’s hand to refine our character and deepen our faith in Christ.

God is so powerful that He can use one form of suffering – disabilities – to defeat another form of evil - our sins. 1 Peter 4:1-2, “*Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God...*” Peter tells us that we need the same way of thinking that Jesus had. Namely, that Jesus is interested in our ceasing from sin and our living for the will of God, more than Jesus is interested in our being healed of disabilities and other weaknesses. Suffering redemptively means that Christ uses disabilities to refine our character.

2. Re-interpreting our affliction by ascribing positive meaning. Rom. 8:17

As Christians, we encourage people with disabilities not to ignore or to despise their affliction and condition. As those who walk hand in hand with Christ, we teach those suffering disabilities not to seek only to escape from suffering. That is not the Christian view of suffering.

Rather, the answer we give to people with disabilities is that we will help them to ascribe positive meaning to their situation. The emphasis on earthly trials and suffering in the New Testament shows us that followers of Jesus Christ are going to have to endure a lot of problems until God calls us home.

Acts 14:22, “*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*” Romans 8:17 shows that we are children of God and “*heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him, in order that we may also be glorified with Him.*” Suffering is part of the Christian life for all of us. Again in 2 Corinthians 1:5, “*we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.*” Our view of suffering must include the gospel truth that both the suffering and the comfort come from God!

As we know from Exodus 4:11, God makes people deaf or mute. God gives sight or makes blind. For children born with disabilities, we are told the same thing for those children as we are told for all children in Psalm 139 that God knit them together in their mother's womb. They are called on to praise God, for they are fearfully and wonderfully made.

For those people suffering from mental and emotional disabilities, we know that they exist in a world that is governed by God's decree. David could write about every day troubles in Psalm 6, "*my soul...is greatly troubled....O LORD, deliver my life...*" And we can read about more severe troubles for King Saul, in 1 Samuel 16:14, "*Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from The LORD tormented him.*" And for a more extreme case, we know that God is capable of ordering such a condition, as God did for King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel chapter 4:16, "*Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him.*"

Here is the underlying truth about suffering. No disease, no illness, no accident, no injury, no difficulty or limitation reaches us apart from God's permission. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 3:3, "*you yourselves know that we were destined for [afflictions.]*" Paul also reminds us in Ephesians 1:11, that "*in [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will...*"

This view of God's sovereignty over suffering is a great comfort to people with disabilities and their families. It is also a comprehensive, God-centered basis for a church's outreach to people with disabilities, and their families.

Why would a God so grand an architect of creation, who is not the author of evil, then choose to adopt a pattern of turning human history on the hinges of the suffering, weakness and humility of people? As we explore that question, we discover God's consistent nature.

God uses suffering for positive results for His Kingdom. God uses disabilities to perfect and strengthen us, and to keep us from falling. Psalm 66:8-9, "*Bless our God, O peoples; let the sound of His praise be heard, who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip. For You, O God, have tested us; You have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet You have brought us out to a place of abundance.*"

Even Jesus experienced suffering, and it had foundational Kingdom results. Hebrews 2:10, "*...it was fitting that He, for whom and by whom all things exist, in*

bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.”

The suffering of a disability in the life of a Christian, allows the life of Christ to be shown to others. God builds strength, virtue, compassion, faith, and sacrificial love into His children, “*to become conformed to the image of His Son...*” Romans 8:29. There is significance and meaning to all the pain.

The church begins to radiate the beauty of Christ our bridegroom as we show people God’s bigger purposes for His glory. The church honors God when we engage in selfless acts of compassion, when we pray for the hurting, and when we help the needy and equip all saints for the work of ministry.

3. Re-focusing on the gospel. Mark 1:29-39

Doesn’t the Bible encourage people with disabilities to seek healing from God, even a miraculous healing? When we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we find there a Savior who healed people. God is the same God today, so why would there be so few divine healings today?

How should Christians with disabilities view Scripture when healing and relief from suffering does not come?

Please turn to Mark 1:29-39, which provides insight into this question. As you turn there, let me summarize it. In this passage, Jesus was healing all the sick. Very early the next morning, Jesus went off by Himself to pray alone. When the crowds came with more people who were sick and disabled, the disciples went to look for Jesus. When they found Jesus, they told Him that everyone was looking for Him. What did the people want? More miraculous healing for physical disabilities and sicknesses! The fascinating thing is how Jesus responded.

Listen for it as I read it. Mark 1:29-39, “*And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.” And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may*

preach there also, for that is why I came out.” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.”

Did you catch the fascinating reply from Jesus? Let us go to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.

It is not that Jesus lacks care and compassion about people whose bodies are deformed and immobilized with disabilities. It is not that Jesus lacks any care and compassion for people who are blind or whose bodies are so filled with cancer that no treatments will stop the spread.

Here is the key insight for the church to grasp and for the church to use as a core implementing strategy for our ministry to all people with disabilities and their caregivers.....the illnesses and disabilities of people was not the sole focus of Jesus. The gospel was the sole focus of Jesus.

What Jesus communicated here, and Mark recorded for us as carried along by the Spirit of God in this passage is vitally important. Sin will kill you. Judgment is real. God is merciful. Entering God’s kingdom by faith will change you fundamentally on the inside. Jesus is not merely the passport into the kingdom of God, but Jesus also came to live abundantly in each of us believers, whether we have a life-dominating disability or not. Jesus came to live through us. Sometimes, there is a plan of God that is greater than our healing, our relief. Sometimes, it is in the enduring of the disability, that God works to advance His Kingdom.

For example, a woman named Joni Earickson Tada has Jesus Christ living through her. The light of Jesus shines brightly through her. Would that happen if she had been healed the day after her accident that paralyzed her from the neck down?

Whenever we read passages like this one in Mark chapter 1, we realize afresh that whenever people missed the core message of Jesus, there was an unhelpful shift of focus. They missed the main message of Jesus removing the main problem of sin, and started to come to Jesus for removal of side problems such as pains and sicknesses and disabilities. And when that started to happen, what did Jesus do? Jesus backed away from those crowds, and went other places.

What does that teach us?

That teaches us that Jesus is filled with compassion, and so every believer must remain filled with compassion. And it also teaches us that the main purpose of our Savior was not to make people’s bodies whole and make their lives happy, healthy, and free from troubles. Rather, the main purpose of our Savior was to

rescue us from sin and conform us on the inside to the image of Christ by the power of His Spirit.

God has the same power today to heal as He did in the days that Jesus healed people on this earth. But the Bible does not teach that God will always heal those who come to Him in faith. God from His vantage point at the one with all authority over heaven and earth, can see what we cannot see. God reserves the right and prerogative to heal and not to heal, as God sees fit.

Peter suffered, and Peter understood this. Peter teaches it to us in 1 Peter 4:17, “...let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

Paul suffered, and Paul agreed with Peter. Paul taught us the right approach in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

This is a heavy calling. And yet we are called to rejoice. How?

Paul walked through suffering with what he called a “thorn in the flesh”, and tells us how to endure suffering with joy in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, “*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*”

For the person with disabilities who does not experience a divine healing, God grants the strength to endure a lifetime with that disability.

Conclusion:

A Christian with a disability can enrich a church. All of us have weaknesses and limitations, and yet those of us who are able-bodied can learn by faith to grow and to endure our weaknesses. Christians with disabilities are God’s visual aids of His power being made perfect in weakness.

In a world that is hurting and divided, this is a powerful lesson. God can use people with disabilities to illustrate for the church and illustrate for the rest of the world the truths. One of the best ways this is seen is an otherwise unexplainable joy.

Joni Earekson Tada wrote a book called *A Place of Healing*, and in it she wrote about a little toddler, a boy with Down’s Syndrome. Joni sat with the boy Isaiah and his sister Mary, as Mary was feeding the boy. Mary said, “All of us in our family have a ministry. Just look at Isaiah!” At that point Isaiah turned and gave Joni the biggest, happiest grin. At the same time, his eyes sparkled and his

cheeks got just like two little apples. Come on, Joni, someone might say. “It was just a toddler’s smile” I’m just here to tell you that there was something that set that smile apart. It was transcendent. It glowed. And it gave me so much joy to see him. “See what I mean?” his sister Mary said. “Isaiah has his own ministry too. It’s his smile!” She was right. The little boy’s face beamed with happiness beyond this world. If you ever wanted to see pure joy right out of the heavenly tap, it was there in that boy’s countenance.

Do disabilities fit in the church? Yes. It is such a vital truth, that I am preaching a series of sermons called Disabilities fit in the church. A person once said it in another way, very clearly, “A church without a disabled person is a disabled church.” Let us be thankful for the Christians with disabilities that God has placed within our church family. We are called to suffer together and rejoice together, while we wait for Jesus to come and take us home together.

And everlasting joy shall be upon our heads. And sorrow and sighing shall flee away.