

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 27, 2011 The Desert Shall Blossom As the Rose

No. 3595

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear Radio Friends,

# I

In the coming weeks we will consider the treasure and the wonder of the birth of Jesus Christ from the view point of Isaiah 35, which speaks to us of the blessings that come to us as a result of the birth of our Savior.

Isaiah 35 is a beautiful chapter. It speaks in a picturesque way of the blessings that will be brought when Immanuel comes. Immanuel means “God with us.” The name Immanuel speaks of the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God come to us in our human flesh.

The writing of Isaiah 35 is, as I said, beautiful in its prose, as it seeks to reflect the beauty of the blessings of Immanuel’s reign. I can remember, as a boy, being enthralled by this chapter. “The desert,” we read, “shall blossom as the rose...the eyes of the blind shall be opened...the parched ground shall become a pool of water...the redeemed of the Lord shall go upon a highway of holiness.” The point of the chapter is that when God pours out upon us sinners His goodness and grace in the coming of His Son Immanuel, great blessings come upon His precious church.

The beauty of Isaiah 35 is seen in its sharp contrast to chapter 34. In chapter 34 Isaiah is the voice of judgment, judgment upon a reprobate and wicked world that has lifted itself up in pride against God. There God brings words of final judgment upon the wickedness of all who are His enemies in unbelief and sin. “For the indignation of the LORD is upon all nations” (v. 2). “And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down” (v. 4). “For it is the day of the LORD’s vengeance, and the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion” (v. 8). In chapter 34, the prophet Isaiah foretells the day of final judgment, when God enters into judgment with mankind.

In contrast, chapter 35 of Isaiah speaks of the blessings of grace, blessings that will come to His children in the way of Jesus Christ. In verse 1 of Isaiah 35 we read, “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them.” We ask, “For whom?” That brings us back to verse 17 of chapter 34. We read, “And he [that is, God] hath cast the lot for them, and his hand hath divided it unto them by line: they shall possess it for ever, from generation to generation shall they dwell therein.” The ones to whom God makes these beautiful promises in Isaiah 35 are the ones who will be gathered by His Spirit. They are the ones that God has chosen freely of grace. Rather than that we should be judged and condemned with the world, which would have been justice,

the Lord has brought to us the blessings of His Son. He has brought us salvation in the coming of Immanuel.

Many different interpretations have been given to Isaiah 35 throughout the history of the church. I will not now give a critique of these interpretations. It is plain enough to us that this beautiful chapter (Isaiah 35) speaks of the blessings that come in Jesus Christ. “He will come and save you” (v. 4). The ear of faith needs no more information to know who that is. That is Jesus Christ. And then, to seal it, verses 5 and 6: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped....” You recall that, in Matthew 11:1-6, when John the Baptist in prison was wondering whether Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” And in response, the Lord quoted verses 5 and 6 of Isaiah 35. He said, “Tell John that the eyes of the blind are being opened and that the ears of the deaf are unstopped.” In other words, Jesus Himself, in Matthew 11, identifies Himself as the one of whom Isaiah is speaking in chapter 35. This chapter speaks in picturesque and sublime ways of the blessings that God brings to us when Immanuel (God with us) comes to the earth.

In verses 1 and 2, today, we look at the beautiful promise that the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose. It shall blossom abundantly, we read in verse 2, “and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.”

Note with me that there is a marvelous change being foretold. A re-creation or transformation is being promised. When God’s grace and glory bring His Son into the world, there will be a marvelous change. Isaiah puts the change in the figure of death to life, of barrenness to fruit, of desolation to joy and singing. Pictured to us is something very familiar to the experience of the Old Testament believer—a desert, a wilderness, a solitary place. The prophet may well have had in mind the desert that lay to the south of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea stretching all the way to the Gulf of Aqabah, where it was a dry land of slate rock, arid and hot, inhabited by jackals and foxes, scorpions and screech owls—a desert, a desolate, barren place, inhospitable to human life, a weary land and burnt.

Suddenly, the prophet says, there is a transformation. And the transformation is not simply a momentary change produced by the spring rain bringing flowers, but a miraculous change, a transformation into a luxuriant garden. “The desert shall blossom as the rose,” or, literally, a crocus, a hyacinth. Desert flowers will be carpeting the entire area of the desert as far as the eye can reach. The desert shall blossom abundantly, that is, beyond expectation. Desert sand, rocks, brush, sharp-pointed cacti changed into an abundant sea of flowers and bloom.

And more. The very topography is altered. “The glory of Lebanon,” we read in verse 2, “shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon.” The glory of Lebanon was its forests, its cedar trees, trees that Solomon imported for the building of the temple. Carmel and Sharon were mountains in central Canaan noted for their beauty. It was to Mount Carmel that all Israel came in the days of Elijah to learn that Jehovah, He is God. Carmel and Sharon were hills

shaded with oak trees, valleys with rich, loamy soil, fertile for farming, for wheat and barley, and for cows, sheep, and oxen. The idea is that the desert is being changed into a meadow.

And yet more. We read, the desert land shall “rejoice even with joy and singing.” While previously there had been the sounds of the screech owl, the squawk of a vulture, the howl of a coyote, now there is singing. There is the chirping of birds. There are the melodies and songs from homes. Where the message once was desolate, solitary, bitter, death, now the message is “the heavens are telling the glory of God.” All the creation is sounding in joy and song.

So is pictured to us the marvelous, the miraculous, the glorious change that was brought to pass through the coming and the gift of God’s Son Jesus Christ when He was born. Jesus Christ did not come to make us over. It was not a patch-job. But He came from the hand of God to perform a miraculous, spiritual change. It is certainly true that our Savior’s redemption is so complete that the creation itself that is now under the curse of sin shall be redeemed and shall share in the glory of His redemption. You may read Romans 8:19-23. And we must remember, too, that in the manger the little baby being nursed by Mary is creation’s Savior and Redeemer who shall, by His power, renew all things in the day of His glory and shall make a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation, when He, through the fires of His judgments, will change our bodies and all things in the creation around us. The curse shall be no more. There shall be no more death and no more need of the sun. All around us will shout and speak and sparkle with the glory of God.

But the promise, the miraculous change that is being pictured in verses 1 and 2 of Isaiah 35, is the miraculous change of grace wrought by Jesus Christ in the heart and lives of His children. “He will come and save you” (v. 4)—not your body from physical woe and poverty, but your *soul* from sin.

The desert and the wilderness and the solitary place represent our life as the result and consequence of our sin and the desolation that our sin brings. Sin promises such sweetness and pleasure, but it brings utter desolation. In our sin is the heat and the burden of our guilt before a holy and just God. In our sin is bitterness. Sin consumes all things in the service of ourselves. Sin dries up. Sin leaves utterly withered. It destroys relationships. Sin brings desolation, barrenness, and death, judgment and burden and guilt into our soul.

But Jesus Christ was born. He came into our state. He took upon Himself our sin and our curse, that He might bear them away. And now there is this miraculous and marvelous change—there is life, where there was formerly barrenness of the soul. Now the desert land is blossoming as a rose. Out of our hearts proceed prayer and praise, faith and trust—all as a result of His coming and His marvelous work. The grace that came in Jesus, when Jesus was born, was a marvelous grace. It was a transforming power. It was a life-creating and life-renewing grace. As the desert was transformed to a meadow, so we, dead sinners under the wrath of God, are now redeemed and brought into the joyful presence of God.

All of this reveals the glory of God. What is being seen in the transformation that Isaiah speaks of is the glory and the excellency of God. God’s works always tell about Him. “O Lord, our Lord,” we read in Psalm 104:25, “how marvelous are thy works. In wisdom thou hast made

them all. The earth is full of thy riches.” The creation, and God’s work of providence in upholding and directing and governing the creation—all of these the eye of faith beholds with wonder and awe.

But God’s glory is revealed especially, and to its greatest extent, in His work of grace, in His work of salvation by the sending of Jesus Christ.

Now, we might ask, as we look at the birth of Jesus Christ, where is the glory and the excellency of God to be seen? The answer is: You must have an eye to see it. You must be *given* an eye to see it. That is true of the creation as well. For unbelief is blind to God and His glory and His excellency in creation, and it refuses to acknowledge Him. So also is that true in the birth of Jesus. Children, if you are to see the glory of the Lord in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the Holy Spirit Himself must give you an eye of faith. You need the vision of a lowly sinner. The eye of man sees nothing glorious in Jesus’ birth. It tries to invent and make the glory. And indeed, humanly speaking, there was no glory. It could hardly have been worse. Mary gave birth to her son on a barn floor amid the smell of animal manure. He, her son, is Lord of all, but He is wrapped in discarded rags. Yet *there* was the revelation of God’s glory. In fact, nothing so revealed God’s glory as when Mary held the babe in her arms. It was the glory of God’s grace.

Rather than that we, His church and people, should perish, God gave His Son in our place, to bear our penalty and earn for us what we could not earn—an everlasting righteousness with God. The gift of Jesus was the outshining of God’s heart. He gave His own Son. God’s glory was never more radiant, never so revealed, as when His own Son clothed Himself with our flesh and came under the guilt of our sin. The glory is the God of grace. The glory is His favor to the undeserving. The glory is the God of mercy and compassion to the miserable—a God of love to those who are unlovely. His grace to embrace us in Jesus Christ is the glory of saving grace that is seen in Jesus’ birth. And *that* is what is behind the change.

The desert blossoms as a rose because God is glorious in His grace. Jesus Christ comes to save us because God is glorious in His grace. And He is excellent.

He works out the way by which we might be saved. When God sent Jesus Christ into the world, God did not ignore His eternal justice against our sin. He did not pass by judgment. He did not excuse sin. But, remaining holy, righteous, and true, He punished our sin. Only He laid our sin upon the head of our substitute, whom He, in grace, had given to stand in our place.

God is excellent. God is surpassingly wise. God brings salvation in a marvelous way. Jesus Christ is born; the eternal Son of God has now come. Heaven’s Prince, who remains God, now is joined to our flesh. He has come to satisfy the justice of God against sin. He has come to bring liberty to us who were miserable sinners and to make us new—so that out of the desert there might come forth glory unto God.

Do you see this? Do you see this marvelous grace of God to you, an undeserving, desolate, bitter, barren sinner? That is the grace of God opening your heart and giving you to see your desperate need and the marvel of His grace and wisdom in giving Jesus Christ as the only Savior.

Do you see that as you celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ? Do you see the glory of the Lord being revealed to you?

If we are truly to see the marvelous change and the glory of the Lord wrought in the coming of Jesus Christ His Son, then this must be given to us. It must be worked in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. To see all of this is grace. All of the rich blessings of salvation are the gift of God. They are undeserved by us. They are unsought by us and they are unearned by us. They are freely, graciously, and powerfully given.

Note that we read that the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them. You remember that I pointed back to verse 17 of chapter 34, to define who the “them” are. They are the ones whom the Lord has chosen in the grace of election. But then, note again in chapter 35 verse 2 that the “glory of Lebanon shall be given unto *it*,” and shall be given unto them. Throughout the passage we read that this is all something that God gave. We did not deserve this, we did not ask for or earn this. The wondrous, saving work of Jesus Christ, from the very beginning to its end, from the stable to the cross, to the empty tomb, to the exaltation at God’s right hand, to His return in judgment, is all something that is “given” freely of God’s grace to His children—to you, whom He gives to know the desolate nature of your sin.

To you, who are burdened and troubled and weary of soul under a load of sin, marvelous and amazing and breathtaking, unimaginable, awesome, excellent, wonderful things the Lord hath done when He sent His Son to be born in Bethlehem. Rather than that we, dry, dead, solitary sinners, should be consumed, grace gave His Son that we might be changed and transformed from guilt to pardon, from death to life. So that the desert might blossom abundantly, that we might praise, give thanks, serve, love, trust, pray, confess. Confess what? Glory to God. How excellent are His ways.

May God bless you today with His precious word.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for this beautiful prophecy of the wonderful work of Jesus Christ and the powerful transformation of Thy grace in Him. Bring that word into our hearts with much comfort and assurance. We pray, in Jesus’ name, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

December 4, 2011

Then Shall a Lame Man Leap

No. 3596

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear Radio Friends,

### C

Continuing today our series of messages on the blessing of Immanuel's reign, we return to Isaiah 35, and we look at verses 3-6. We read: "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing."

We saw last week that this beautiful chapter in Isaiah speaks of the rich and priceless blessings of Messiah's appearance. It speaks of what it means for us that God's Son came to earth, through the virgin birth. An unimaginable and inconceivable transformation will be brought to pass, we read in verses 1 and 2—more marvelous than anything we could imagine. A barren wilderness is portrayed to us. A solitary, scorched desert. Suddenly this is changed before the presence of the Lord. The desert blossoms as a rose. The burning desert (vv. 1, 2 of Isaiah 35) is now clothed with flowers. The towering cedars and the glory of Lebanon are given unto it. The excellency of Carmel and Sharon, rich pastures and meadows, now constitute the landscape that was before bleak and barren.

We saw a picture of the spiritual renewal and change that comes to God's children as a result of the gift of God's Son in our flesh. It is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was sent for us depraved-in-sin, barren and guilty enemies of God. He came first of all to change us, to take away that awful guilt, and then to renew us by the Holy Spirit, implanting in our hearts His life.

Jesus Christ came to save sinners. That is why He was born in Bethlehem. Jesus Christ did not come into the world to make this present world a nicer place from which men can go to hell. He did not come to redeem society. He came to transform His children from children of wrath unto children of God. Do you know this because this marvelous transformation by the Holy Spirit has been wrought in you? Grace makes the great difference, when it enters into a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. Marvelous transformation of grace!

But now, as we continue in the chapter, we see that an equally powerful picture of the blessings of Jesus' birth is given to us in verses 3-5. Now we read, not of a transformation of land and soil and climate, of a desert to a meadow, but of the inhabitants of the land. They are

pictured to us as a people who are distraught and hopeless, having weak hands and feeble knees. They are commanded to be strong and to fear not, for their God will come to save them. And then, when He comes, what shall happen? The eyes of the blind shall be opened. The ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame shall leap as an hart. And the tongue of the dumb shall sing.

Here we read of a spiritual transformation of our soul, of our being, of our life. We who are corrupt and depraved in sin cannot see, cannot hear, cannot speak—but we are changed to see the wonder of God’s saving grace, to hear the voice of our Savior, to leap in cheerful service of God, and to sing to show forth His praises. And all of this is brought to us in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Do you know this personally? Is this the joy of the season for you, the joy of your life, the reason of your joy? When God’s eye of love saw us and sent His Son for us, He brought about a change so great in us—not a reformation of character, but an entire change, a spiritual change of will, being, desire. If ‘grace’ permits you to sin and to live as one who does not know Jesus Christ, then you have no grace. Grace changes us. The lame shall leap as an hart.

We see here, first of all, a word of encouragement that is being spoken by the prophet. The prophet is commissioned to speak a word of encouragement to those who are weak and at the point of despair, who feel overwhelmed, who are ready to lie down and quit. And the encouragement centers in the fact that God will come and save us. We read: “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you.”

Weak hands, in the Bible, are a picture of a person who lacks courage, courage to go on. He has been busy, but obstacles have become too much. And now he sees no way out and no purpose for living. Feeble knees are a picture of a person who has lost all assurance and confidence. He feels that strength and hope have leaped out of his soul, and he cannot lay hold of the promises of God. And the result will be a fearful heart, dread of the future.

Hebrews 12:3, 12 explains what is meant by weak hands, feeble knees, and fearful heart. In verse 3 we are told that we must consider Him, that is, Jesus Christ, lest we be wearied and faint in our minds. And then, in verse 12, we read, “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees.” There the passage is speaking of the fact that God brings His chastisements. Chastisements are God’s corrections for our sin, and they can be very grievous. He forgives us. But He chooses in His wisdom sometimes to chastise us in order that we might learn obedience. And so, when our inmost thought is that God’s way is too hard and that He does not realize the effect His chastisement is having upon us, and when our soul is not satisfied with God’s way and purpose, then comes the word of God: “Lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees.”

Are your hands weak and your knees feeble today? Do you know the promises of God but cannot take hold of them? They do not seem to support you? Your sin—have you ever seen your sin this way, so that all breath goes out of you, you’ve repented, God has forgiven you, and yet you bear the consequences of that sin? And it hurts. And you are filled with remorse over the

memory and the folly of your sin. Or afflictions. Your own afflictions, or the afflictions of others. These afflictions that come upon you and your loved ones wear you down. Or you say, “The way of the Lord is impossible. There is no hope for me.” Or depression, as a black rider, pursues you and you have no place to go.

The word of the Lord comes to you as a child of God and says, “Strengthen the weak hands. Confirm (or assure) the feeble knees. Say, Be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come.” His voice infuses courage into our souls. He promises us that He will come as the God of our salvation. And the encouragement that God brings to us focuses on one thing: the birth of our Savior, the coming of Messiah, the appearance of the Lord of glory in the flesh.

We must get that. The gospel of Christ’s birth is the word of divine encouragement. It is the word of strengthening for you and me and all the children of God in whatever way the Lord leads us. We must think about that. We must meditate upon that. We must not rush on. We say, “Oh, yes, we know that Jesus Christ was born in that stable. What little child doesn’t know about that?” Yet, we get so rattled. We become so anxious. We are overwhelmed. It is as if we do not know the fact that we have been given a Savior. The birth of our Savior, the coming of God’s Son into our flesh, is our strength and encouragement. It is the message that God has descended from His throne, broke through the darkness, come among us to bear us up and to deliver us from our sin.

To the world of unbelief, the coming of Jesus is terror. Christmas-terror! For, we read, the Lord will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense upon His enemies.

But Jesus Christ appears as the light of God, the salvation of the church. And, therefore, be strong, fear not. Christ is born. Your sin, your chastisements—you say, “There is no hope”? Listen. God has come to save us. And now those chastisements are directed by His eternal love. Your sickness and your affliction? Your Savior bore all of these things and they are in His hands. They are being used of Him to mold and prepare you. You say, “The way of the Lord is too much”? Do not judge God with your eyes. But look upon Bethlehem and see that He has cherished us, He has given His own Son for us.

The birth of Jesus Christ is a word of marvelous and divine encouragement. And the birth of Jesus Christ is a word to us of a gracious change. God will come. For Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. And when God comes, then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. When God comes to save, it will be a glorious change worked in the children of God.

The world cannot see this. The world says, “You say a powerful change came into the world in Bethlehem of Judea, more powerful than the creative voice of God by which, you say, all things were made? We have gone there to Bethlehem. But there are still birth defects and disease and death and crime and poverty and war, and perversions are getting worse. Where is the change? Do you mean to say that we are to redeem the world for Jesus, that hope lies in legislation of men, social renewal, acceptance of every religion, the Ten Commandments on the courthouse wall? He came,” says the world, “where is the change? Where is that dynamic, marvelous, victorious change? Where?”



The answer of the gospel is: It is in the heart of His children. If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (II Cor. 5:17). It is the powerful, living change within the child of God, from a dead, hell-deserving, hate-filled sinner to one who bows his knee in love and reverence before Jesus Christ.

God says the marvelous change is the one that the grace of Christ brings to us. “I once was blind, but now I see; I was deaf but now I hear; lame from the neck down but not I leap; I was dumb but now I sing.” Then, says the text, that is, when Jesus comes, this marvelous change reflecting the glory of God shall be accomplished. A marvelous power more amazing than when the Red Sea was parted or when the sun stood still in the days of Joshua or when God spoke the whole world into being in the beginning. The marvelous power of grace is seen when God’s Son in the flesh comes and when God’s Son takes to Himself all the curse and the hell of our sin and when His Spirit comes to renew our hearts that we, who are dead sinners, might know Him and confess Him. Do you know this change from a corrupt sinner to a repentant child of God—this marvelous, creative, gracious change that God alone can perform within our hearts, and that He does through Jesus Christ?

It is a four-fold change. Then shall the eye of the blind be opened. To be *blind* is to be unable to see the beauty of God. To be blind is to be enthralled with the darkness of sin. To be blind is to live in conceit and pride. It is to imagine that lust gives pleasure, that things bring peace, that applause and acceptance bring satisfaction. That is to be blind. To *see* is to know God in love, God in all His majesty, goodness, and grace—to stand in awe of God. It is to see your sin, to see your nature as proud, hateful, and arrogant. And it is to see God’s word, God’s will, as alone the way of wisdom and power. It is to see Christ by faith—your Savior—and to love Him. The blind are made to see.

Then shall the ear of the deaf be unstopped. To be *deaf* is to be unable to hear the sounds of the creation. It is to be unable to hear the voice of God. It is not to hear God speaking. It is rather to be deaf, hard. It is to listen to sin. To *hear* is to hear God in His Word. It is to hear the Savior speak the gospel to you personally, calling you by name.

Then shall the lame man leap as an hart. To be *lame* means there is no impulse, no strength, to walk in the truth of Christ. It is to be unable to move toward God. To *walk* means to be given the new man of Christ that feels exuberant, unquenchable joy in Christ, and to be made willing, in Christ, cheerfully to walk the way of His will.

Then shall the tongue of the dumb sing. To *speak* is to be able to say, “My God, how wonderful Thou art.” But we are *dumb* of ourselves to God’s praise. Our tongues are quick, sharp, dirty in sin, gossip, criticism, cursing, and blasphemy. The language of God’s praises cannot be found in sinners. The syllables and the consonants just do not come. But when grace touches the heart, it reaches the tongue. We feel that we must thank Him. And we want our tongue to be an instrument of His grace, not a weapon to destroy. We sing—not just talk. We gather at the foot of the cross and we sing even while we are in trials and in sickness and in death. The voice of joy and thanksgiving is in the tabernacles of the righteous (Ps. 118).

And all of this, this marvelous change: to see, to hear, to walk and to leap, to sing and to speak—all of this change, this marvelous spiritual change, is of grace. There is only one difference between those who rest in heaven and those who anguish in hell. There is one difference between those who walk in the robes of white and righteousness in Jesus Christ and those who gnash their teeth. The difference is grace, and grace alone.

Can the blind make themselves see? Can the deaf make themselves hear? Can the paralyzed leap? Can the dumb sing? It is all of grace. God would build for Himself a people in heaven to behold Him, to hearken to Him, to walk with Him, to sing to Him, to hear Him, and to talk to Him. And where did He get these people? He got them, by His grace, from those who were dead, dumb, blind, unable to move.

When Solomon built a place for himself and for God, he did so out of cedar and out of gold. But when God built His palace in glory, He sent His grace and mercy into the pit of sin, into a desert land among the blind, deaf, lame, and dumb. He sent His Son Jesus Christ into Bethlehem. “Go, go, My Son. Gather the outcasts, gather the unworthy into My house. Reveal the marvel of My grace.”

I am commissioned to proclaim the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. God says, “Say to them that are of a fearful heart.” The message that I bring is God’s message. God has sent the One, Jesus Christ, who gives sight to blind men, hearing to deaf men, strength to lame men, and a voice to the dumb. The call of the gospel, by His grace, is: “Believe on Him, trust in Him, repent. Bow before Him.” Grace working within our hearts produces a change, a profound change—a realization of our own sin and depravity and the wonder of Jesus Christ.

God commissions me to say to all who, by His grace, know this marvelous change: Are you hopeless? Have you come to a place where you are going to give up? Are you ready to despair? Say unto them, Be strong. Fear not. For behold, your God has come in a manger, in Jesus Christ, to save you with a marvelous and powerful grace.

To God, then, and to God alone, be all praise and thanksgiving.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy word. We ask again that the Holy Spirit may bless this word unto our hearts and lives. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

December 11, 2011

The Mirage Shall Become a Pool

No. 3597

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear Radio Friends,

# F

For the past two weeks we have been following the beautiful chapter of Isaiah 35 as it speaks to us of the glorious and wonderful blessings of the coming of Immanuel, God's Son in the flesh, and of the great salvation that He will bring. All questions of who the prophet is speaking about in Isaiah 35 are answered in verse 4 of the chapter: "He will come and save you," we read, or, literally, "He himself will come and save you." Immediately faith recognizes that this is a prophecy of Jesus Christ. Salvation has been brought to us in the birth of Jesus Christ. We must grasp that wonder with all of our heart. The result of the birth of Jesus Christ is the most marvelous gift of God. In figurative language, Isaiah 35 speaks of a marvelous transformation: the desert shall blossom as a rose—a picture of the solitary desert now carpeted with spring flowers, and having cedars and pastures where once there had been a barren landscape—a wonderful change.

And we saw that this means that the gospel declares that totally depraved sinners are loved graciously of God, and those who are evil are renewed by the gift of Jesus Christ. They are changed, changed from the desert of hate and indifference to the life of God's love in Christ. Salvation in Jesus Christ is not a cosmetic change to a person's life. It is a marvelous transformation of the mighty grace of God.

Still more. We see in this chapter that God commissions a word to be spoken to those who are weak of hand and feeble of knees. That word was, "Be strong and fear not." Why? Again, the answer is, He will come and He will bring a marvelous salvation. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing." We shall be changed by the marvelous grace of God. By the birth of Jesus Christ, those who are spiritually blind, dumb, and lame are changed spiritually to know, see, love, obey, and walk with God.

This glorious transformation will also affect our bodies. For the day will come when Jesus Christ returns. And He shall change our bodies (Phil. 3:20, 21), and make them like unto His most glorious body. We will have a new body—a spiritual change in the body too, in the last day, when Jesus comes to raise our bodies from the grave.

Do you believe this? This is what has been brought to us when Immanuel, God's Son in the flesh, was born in Bethlehem.

Continuing today in Isaiah 35 we come to verses 6 and 7: "For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes."

The word "parched ground" is, literally, "to glare" or "quivering glow" or "mirage." The idea is that the mirage shall become a pool of water, the point being that in a world of false hopes and delusions, disappointments and frauds, the salvation that Christ brings is no such delusion or fraud—no mirage. But it is real. It is satisfying. And it is *absolutely* glorious! Christ and the salvation that He brought to us are no mirage. Jesus said, "He that believeth on me *hath* life." He said, "I am come that they might *have* life." He said, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and I will give to him living water."

So the point of the passage now is this: that in a world of delusions and false hopes and despair and vanity, God has sent His Son into the flesh to bring to us a real, full, and complete salvation. The mirage shall become a pool of water.

The Old Testament believer would be very familiar with the picture of life that is given in Isaiah 35:6, 7. It is the picture of a traveler, or a nomad, one who is on a journey. He must pass through a wilderness, a desert. It is trackless—no roads or paths. And it is waterless. The hot sun would beat down upon his head and the destination would seem as if never to come. He would become weary, and his spirits would drop. He would begin to long for water to slake his deepening thirst. A sense of panic and confusion would seize him. He would become obsessed with the thought of water. In the distance he would see what appeared to be a pool of blue water stretching over the horizon. And he would say to himself, "I have only now to reach that pool and I shall have water and rest, for an oasis must be there." Only to find that when he got to that place in the desert, there was only parched ground—literally, glowing, shimmering sand. The sun shining on the sand gave the appearance of water. He had been deceived. His mind had deceived him. It was an illusion. He would go on again. And this would happen again and again. Each time he would become more convinced that he would find water there. But each time he would find that he had been deluded by a mirage.

So, says God's Word, is this life, apart from and outside of God and Jesus Christ. Man, according to the Bible, is on a journey. He is a traveler. He is passing through this life. We do not have to go far in this life before we become very tired as we journey through a wilderness. For the curse of sin is upon this present life. Soon the rose-colored glasses come off our face. There are problems. There are sorrows. There are pains. There is sin and difficulty and disease and cancer and poverty and collapse of business and break-down of family and home and marriage. There is depression, despair, anxiety, panic. And man is always looking for those things that will bring to him satisfaction, joy, and peace—perhaps a relationship, or perhaps some religion. He looks into the future and he says, "Oh, if ever I can attain unto this, if I can have this person, if I can obtain this thing, or get this job, or be brought to this position, then my inner thirst shall be satisfied." Only to find that when he arrives at that place, he sees that all that

he had pinned his hopes upon was only a delusion. While it appeared from the distance to be able to give happiness and satisfaction to the soul, it could do none of those things. Always it would turn to something else, someone else, a different object that promises to give rest and peace and life and relief, which in turn would again prove to be a mirage. When we get there, it is only sand. We find it to be empty, not what we thought, and it does not satisfy.

In the versification of Psalm 63: “Apart from Thee I long and thirst, and nought can satisfy.” In the words of Isaiah 57: “The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest.” The emptiness of our souls cannot be filled with anything of this present time or life. It is all sand. Man tries to find satisfaction, rest, peace, and happiness. But all that he finds is disappointment and disillusionment. The world and the devil offer up many a mirage for people to pin their hopes upon, as something that promises to bring happiness to their souls. There is the mirage of pleasure and entertainment. Everything that is needed, we are told today, can be obtained through pleasure and entertainment. Your happiness can be found simply in partying harder. Booze, sex, drugs, getting high—that will bring happiness to your never-dying soul, says man. Or, get a video and cheer yourself up, so that you will not be lonely. These are the things that will get rid of your troubles. Or sports. Become consumed by your team—if they win the pennant or the Stanley Cup or the Rose Bowl. Or the pleasures of sin—another woman, drunkenness, stoned out of your mind, party. These things will satisfy.

The whole world is based upon this belief. Billions and billions of dollars are spent out of this belief that pleasure and human entertainments can satisfy and bring peace to a soul.

Do you believe that? Is that what your life is predicated upon? It is a delusion.

There is the delusion of wealth, that earthly things and power of money can bring satisfaction—the belief that money will be able to buy happiness and provide real protection. And then one begins to pin his hopes on his economic situation. If it collapses, his life collapses. Success in business is all that matters. So, what brings peace is a bigger home, more clothes, toys, cars. These will be the things that will make us happy. In the words of the rich fool of Jesus’ parable, men and women then say, “Soul, take thine ease. Thou hast much goods laid up for thyself.”

Do you believe that? Do you believe that things and stuff and possessions are what life is all about and that these will bring to your soul peace? The Bible says this is a delusion.

But then there is the whole delusion today of the realm of inner peace and improvement and change. When men realize how shallow pleasure and things and money appear, they say that the way to true peace and happiness is learning, art, music, self-improvement, philosophy, self-help, yoga, New Age, Dr. Phil, Oprah, developing inward discipline. You get satisfaction by making yourself all that you can be.

Or, change. If only I could have a change—new people, new joy, new husband, new wife, new friends, new situation. If I can find that—something new, a new beginning—this will bring me peace.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that satisfaction and happiness for your soul is to be found within yourself and with some change? This is a delusion.

And then there is the mirage, offered up by the world and the devil, of the false religions. Whatever false religion it may be—Islam, Hinduism, or even a Christianity that is not rooted in a reverence for the Bible, God’s word; does not require a forsaking of sin; considers the Bible to be fallible; is not at heart in awe of God’s grace, but can, rather, be defined by what God can do for you and how He serves your inner purposes—a Christianity that allows for a cutting off from the Bible all that one finds difficult to swallow, and for accepting what one would like the message of Christianity to be.

Is this what you believe? Do you believe in a false religion? Do you believe in a Christianity that has gutted the truth of personal sin and salvation by grace only?

We read in Jeremiah 2:13, “For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” What is evil? Evil there is described as forsaking God as the only treasure, as the only water of life. And then, it is putting your lips to the sand and sucking and sucking and sucking, thinking that you shall find refreshment apart from God.

All of these are a mirage. They are a delusion. They will leave you empty. In the words of the church father Augustine, “Unquiet is our soul until it rests in Thee.”

Jesus Christ, and the salvation that God brings through Him, is no mirage. He will come and save you. For in the wilderness shall water break out, we read, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool and the thirsty land springs of water. Jesus did not come into the world as another mirage. The gospel is not, “Well, try Jesus.” Jesus does not join the list of possibilities of potential help out there. The gospel does not belong on the medicine shelf of the world. The gospel is not, “Well, if Christianity or Christ works for you, fine for you.” But the gospel is this: Jesus Christ, born of the virgin in Bethlehem, God’s Son in the flesh, Savior of the church—this Jesus alone, alone, can satisfy the soul of a man. Salvation is to be found, and rest and peace are to be found, in Him alone.

If any man thirst, said Jesus, let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. Jesus said, “Whosoever drinketh of this water [that is, the water of the world] shall thirst again. But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up to everlasting life.”

No more mirages. The very first thing that the grace of God in Jesus Christ does to a sinner when it saves him is to give him to see himself and this world for what he is and what the world is. Grace is a dose of realism.

We are sinners in a perishing world. Do you know that? Sin and death are in you right now. And the world in which you live is passing away and can give you nothing. All its glitter and

hope are sand and dust. You are a sinner. You are traveling through this wasteland, this desert. Your journey will end. The grave opens up for you, and it leads to eternity and to judgment.

First, grace opens the eyes of the blind. First, grace unstops the ears of the deaf. You cannot save yourself. And the world cannot save you. Of yourself, and looking all around you in this world, you must needs perish. Grace shows you first your own desperate need. Only Christ can save and satisfy. God must lead you to the pool of living water.

But how? How is Jesus Christ the real and satisfying pool of water?

First of all, He is this real water, this satisfaction, because He is the One who makes us right with God. Why was Jesus born? Did He come because there were redeemable qualities in man, because God wished to try out the human experience? No! Jesus Christ was born so that I, by grace, might be made right with God, the God with whom I am not right. I am an enemy of God by nature. All the mirages of self-happiness forget God and will not reckon with the reality of sin. The Bible declares that we have fallen from God, that we are conceived and born in sin, that we have turned our back upon God. For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and therefore deserve God's judgment and condemnation.

How shall we be right with God? If I am right with God, I am right, no matter the circumstances of my life, no matter if I am desperate financially at this time of the year, no matter if I am stressed or suffering a severe disease and illness. If I am right with God, all is well.

How can I be right with God? The answer: of grace. God sent His Son to be burdened down with the sin and curse of His children. He was born in order that He might go to a cross. You see Him in the manger? He was born to bear our griefs and to carry our sorrows (Is. 53). See Him His lifelong? He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with griefs. The Lord hath laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. He came to die on a cross in the place of His children, in order that they might be made right with God.

Jesus is the pool of water, not only by making us right with God, but also by renewing us by His grace. His Holy Spirit enters into us, delivers us from the dominion of sin, and leads us to a life of service to God. Christianity is not a moral code. It is living water. It is the life of Christ being imparted into your heart. It is a change of the heart.

Now we desire in Christ the things that are above. He dwells within us, comforting, directing, empowering, and assuring us. "In Thee my soul (again from Psalm 63) is satisfied, my darkness turns to light." Streams of water break out in the desert. Our Lord Jesus Christ supplies all and every need. He never fails. Everything that I need is in Him. You who have been brought to Him know that He is no mirage. You who have tasted of His living water know He is no delusion. Look at all the things that offer satisfaction. Death robs you of them. Pleasure and wealth and possessions and philosophy and self-help. They are all gone at the moment of death. They cannot help you when your heart is broken and bleeding.

But Jesus Christ is no mirage. He appears in all of His strength and beauty, in the midst of a curse-filled world and before death. He is our Savior. All things for our salvation are to be found in Him.

And so the picture of Isaiah 35 is that out of a desert comes an oasis. The water produces a lush habitation. We read “in the habitation of dragons (or jackals), where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes.” Desert life includes jackals and scorpions and snakes. It brings fears, threats, and evils. The world of sin wants you to think that it is a time of fun and wealth and success. But in reality this world is a dangerous place. It will kill you. When you fall down, and when you are burned out by the pleasures, the scorpions will sting. The jackals will be there to eat up your flesh. Hyenas and vultures will pick your bones. The vanity of sin leaves you in horror.

But the message of the birth of Jesus Christ is that He brings a lush habitation. Where the jackal of hate and greed and pride once lay in our life, now God gives peace and love and joy in the Spirit. Where the scorpion of envy and hate once existed, in Jesus Christ we are brought to peace and rest so that we find salvation in Christ. His blessings are not a trickle. They are not a drop of water from a bucket. But they are streams. Faithfulness over all of our life, pardon full and free, love never changing, grace all-sufficient, joy unquenchable.

Jesus Christ entered into the world to save us from our sins. He is the real Savior. And none who come to Him by grace shall ever be cast away. You will find in Him a pool of water in the desert.

Let us pray.

Father, we pray that Thy word, entering into our heart, may give us peace and joy. And, again, all praise be to Thee alone, Amen.



## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

December 18, 2011

A Highway Through the Desert

No. 3598

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear Radio Friends,

# I

In past weeks we have considered the beautiful prophecy found in Isaiah 35. Today we come to the last verses (8-10). Here we read: “And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there: and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Those who have been to the land of Canaan tell us that there is a road that begins in the little village of Bethlehem, leading north and east up to Jerusalem. Actually, it begins at the door of a stable and leads to a hill outside of Jerusalem shaped as a skull. The one who first traveled this road traveled it all alone. It was narrow, with lightning and thundering, fears and dangers, precipices, enemies. And on Him was placed an awful load. He never missed one step to the hill of the skull.

From the hill outside of Jerusalem, the road leads to a cemetery, in which many graves are opened. And from one grave, a very rich man’s grave, a huge stone is rolled away. And all you can say of this tomb is: It is empty. From the cemetery, the road cuts again through Jerusalem, through a garden of olive trees and up a beautiful mountain called Olivet. And from there the road leads up, through a cloud, to a city whose builder and maker is God, through the gates of pearl, and into streets of gold, near a crystal-clear river, and a tree of Life, with sounds of singing and rejoicing, children playing in the streets, and old men leaping for joy. No street lights. For He who traveled for us is the Light of that city.

The road leads to the center of the city, and there we see a throne, high and lifted up. He that sits upon it rules over all forever and ever. He who traveled the road sits upon His right hand, the blessed and loved of the Father.

Ever since, He has Himself led those whom He redeemed upon His cross on a highway through the desert. A clear way, every stone laid by His own hand. And He Himself walks with us. Those who now walk that road are the redeemed, the ransomed of the Lord, ransomed by His blood. It was their sin that was the awful load that He carried to the cross of Calvary. If you look at the wrists of the redeemed, you will see the marks of handcuffs of sin, for they were long enslaved. And on their backs, the scars of sin. He leads them in a way that often spans deep and

bottomless ravines. He leads them in a way from which many would otherwise fall to damnation. There are bridges over many a whirlpool that would otherwise suck men down to destruction. He often leads His people through valleys and days of rest and days of darkness. But He Himself is with them.

And He leads them to the city where He is King, through the rough door called death and over a river called Jordan, to Zion, where all sorrow and sighing flee away. They awake with His likeness. They see His face eternally. They have joy and gladness. They live there and praise God forever.

Are you on this way? Do you know this way?

There is another way. It is broad. It leads through the dwelling places of sin. It leads through all the places where sinful pride will go. And it ends in damnation and a lake of fire.

Messiah has come. The blessing is this: He takes us, by His grace and through the power of His eternal work, into the embrace of God. He guides and guards and molds and prepares us. And at last He receives us to glory. He does this on the highway of holiness through the desert. Are you on this way?

Isaiah 35 speaks, we have seen, of the gracious blessings given to us when our long-expected Jesus is born and performs God's work for us. Let us do a quick review of what we have seen in this chapter.

All questions of who and what Isaiah is talking about in Isaiah 35 are answered in verse 4: "behold, your God will come...he will come and save you." This is Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary.

The chapter says that His coming brings most amazing transformation. In the first verses we have the stark contrast of a desert transformed to a blanket of flowers, the message being that we totally-depraved sinners and rebels before God are forgiven and renewed.

Then in verses 3-6 the picture is of those who have weak hands and feeble knees, who are prone to fear. They are commanded not to fear, but to arise with great confidence, for the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf shall be opened, the lame man shall leap, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. There shall be a glorious personal transformation.

Then in verses 6 and 7 we have the answer to the question: Is all of this salvation real and true, or is it simply a mirage? Is it a false hope—as the false hopes of the men in this world? The answer is, No, Jesus is the true living water. Where once we lay in sin, now we will be blessed by His Spirit.

And now in verse 8-10 we are told of "an highway that shall be there," that is, in the desert. Not only in this desert does Jesus supply water to us, but we shall be supplied a highway over which we may travel. The desert is a place of destruction, not only because it is dry, but also because we are lost. A highway shall be there. In the world, then, where we would be lost,

where we would be tempted, where we would be seduced and pulled astray—in this desert there shall be a trail, a highway, a place that is cast up and prepared and clear. And Messiah, God’s own Son, who saved us, shall lead us through this desert of sin and bring us to the Father in glory.

It becomes very plain when you study the book of Isaiah, and particularly this chapter, that in the first instance we have a prophecy here of the return of Judah from the Babylonian captivity. The “ransomed” in verse 10, “the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs.” God, as Isaiah foretells, would visit proud and defiant Judah with judgment. He would chasten His children. They would be laid low by Nebuchadnezzar and would be for seventy years in the bondage of Babylon. But God foretells now, in Isaiah 35, that He will bring them back to Zion from Mesopotamia, through the desert. Even as Moses once led the people of Israel from Egypt unto Canaan, so they would be brought back from Babylon to their own land. They would come in transports of joy and mirth.

But that was a picture of our redemption from sin, and from the life of emptiness. That comes to us through Immanuel, God’s Son. Isaiah is not simply talking about a physical highway between present-day Baghdad and Jerusalem. He is not talking about a stretch of land on which archaeologists can find pottery discarded by the Jews when they returned. He is not referring to a paved road from Mesopotamia to Israel or a railroad line from Egypt to Palestine. Rather, Isaiah is talking about the way of God, the way out of sin, out of the desert of guilt and the bondage of iniquity unto eternal life, a way of holiness, a way that would bring one to everlasting joy, where sorrow and sighing will flee away. This is the way of salvation. Isaiah was talking of Christ Himself, who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh to the Father but by me.” The way of preparation by God through fear and trial, the pathway of redemption, the way Christ has made for us out of the bondage of our sin, out of the vanity of death and sorrow, into eternal glory. Do you know this way? Are you on this way?

It is, first of all, a clear way. It is a highway. It is cast up. Wayfaring men, though fools (v. 8), shall not err therein. The idea is that it is a very clear way, well-constructed, easy to see, clear-cut, defined, marked out. The way to eternal life is clear. It is built upon the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. How will my soul escape the judgment of this world? How shall I find rest? What is the way? Not yourself. Not your works. But the blood and the righteousness of Jesus Christ. “By Me,” said Jesus, “by Me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved.” By faith—God’s gift whereby we believe the righteousness of Jesus Christ and confess: “Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.”

It is clear in that the way is marked out step by step in the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures are the light that shines in the dark place. Are you lost? Are you drifting? Are you confused? You have no purpose? You have nothing but conflicts? You have an aimless life? Well, when did you set aside the Scriptures? The way is clear. The Bible is the way. The gospel of faith and repentance, searching the Scriptures, daily prayer. In desert land, it is very easy to go astray. Many wander. Many leave the path. Many fall into the labyrinth of the world. Many go lost in destruction. Jesus is the way. A highway. A clear way revealed in Holy Scripture through faith.

But it is more. It shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it. That is, this way is the way of conformity to the will of God—a delight to obey the commandments of God. The unclean, who defile themselves and set aside the law of God, who live for themselves, shall not pass over this way. You live an impenitent life? You have immunized yourself from the prick of the Holy Spirit upon your conscience? Your Christianity costs you nothing? There are no struggles against your sin, against hate, greed, lust, envy, jealousy? Then you stand in the way of ungodliness, you stand with sinners. You are not in the way. The way that leads to life is the way of holiness, the way of daily repentance. It is the way of the love of Christ that constrains me. It is the beauty of Christ in His grace, and it is the desire to serve Him and to flee from a sinful world.

Finally, this way is safe. We read, “No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there.” The highway of salvation, of belonging to Christ by grace, is a way that is safe. It brings the assurance of safety. The lion (or the devil), the ravenous beast (temptations), and sudden fears (sickness and anxiety)—all of these shall not destroy the people of God. For on the way of salvation, we experience the perfect protection and peace of our Shepherd. The Lord my Shepherd holds me within His tender care. He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. On the highway of salvation comes the promise that God will preserve us.

This is the highway. Who travel this way?

We read, “But the redeemed shall walk there: and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion.” The redeemed and the ransomed of the Lord! To be placed on this highway, and to be kept safe on this highway, you must first be redeemed and ransomed. God’s grace in Christ takes you to heaven and puts you on the way to heaven. For you and I are lost in the desert. Like anyone else, we are sold in the bondage of our sin. We are locked deep down in the dungeon of despair.

The words “redeemed” and “ransomed” would thrill the heart of the Old Testament believers. Those words would ring in their soul. The word “redeemed” would bring to mind that someone or something precious to them had once come under the ownership of another. In the Old Testament, you redeemed a son, or you redeemed a plot of land that had been lost through death or foreclosure. It belonged now to someone else. You would buy it back for yourself. So Jesus Christ is our Redeemer who has purchased us, bought us back out of the depth of sin to Himself.

And “ransomed.” The reference is to the money that was brought to purchase someone out of slavery. What, says the Scripture? Know ye not that ye were bought with a price (I Cor. 6:19-20)? The very blood of Jesus Christ was shed to take us from the bondage of our sin and into the house of God. All who walk the pathway to heaven are those who first must be redeemed from their sin and ransomed from their sin by the marvelous grace of God.

They are now wayfaring men (v. 8). That is another name for a pilgrim. That is a name for a person who travels from place to place on foot, but does not belong to the country through which he passes.

Let me tell you what that means. Wayfaring people are on the highway to Zion. When God, in Christ, puts you on the path to heaven, He puts the life of heaven in your heart, the life of the city where God dwells, the life of Christ, the life of the world to come. He puts that in your heart. You do not walk a path through a desert where there is no water to a land that you abhor or a land that you do not love, or a land to which you do not belong. You walk the path that leads to your home, to your fatherland, to the land of your Father.

If this world is our home, we will not walk the pathway of the redeemed. If our treasure is here below, we will not want to leave behind this present world. The life of the city that is from above is given to us now. The promises, the joys, the victory—all of these things are given to us now. Now, when we go from place to place, He Himself, our Savior, leads us and is with us. But here we have no abiding place. We seek one that is to come. Every day He says, “Up, arise. This land, this city, shall be destroyed. It shall vanish as smoke in the day of the Lord. Up, on the highway that leads to heaven.”

Those who are redeemed and who are made pilgrims, and those who are given a constant Companion, are those who travel on this highway. We read that the unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be there for those, the wayfaring men, and he shall be with them. Every day the Lord Himself is near them. He who paved this way, He who opened the way, He who removes every obstacle on the way, is Himself their leader. God does not begin salvation and leave you on the path to your own resources, but He conducts you to the very end. He leads you upon the highway.

That highway leads through many things, perhaps today through a nursing home, fears and dangers, dark depression, anxiety, or sickness. But He will never ever leave you alone. The way leads to Zion, the city of God. We shall come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon our heads. This destination is sure. It is established. We shall be brought to glory.

There are only two paths in this world. Neither one is a dead-end. The one, the path of sin and destruction, falls off, and all the travelers plunge down and down and down into hell. The other one, of grace, is the highway of the King. It leads to glory, and it is glorious. A joy shall overtake us such as we have never felt before. There is no joy in sin. But in Christ, joy will abound. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away. That is, sorrow and sighing shall not just drop off, but they shall run away. The grief and the sorrow and the sigh and the weariness of this life of sin will be gone forever. And we shall see Him. We shall look upon Him. Just one look upon Him will make all of the grief and pain that we suffer on the highway worth it. By comparison, all affliction will seem to be but a light thing. And He will welcome us. We will sit down, and we will say to Him, “So, it was you all the time leading me on this way.”

And we will journey no more. We will rest at home, glorious and filled with bliss.

For all of this, Jesus came and was born in Bethlehem. The manger and the cross are past. The tomb is empty. The pathway now is before us. He will lead us home. And the call of the Savior is: “Forsake the world, follow the King.”

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word. We pray that it may be applied to our hearts this day by the working of the Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

December 25, 2011

Great Joy Brought to You

No. 3599

Rev. Carl Haak

Dear Radio Friends,

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On this day our meditation from the Word of God is found in Luke 2:10, 11, these familiar words: “And the angel said unto them [that is, the shepherds], Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” It is my prayer that these good tidings of great joy may be something that is brought to you today in your souls. It is my prayer that after hearing this word of God, we might possess in our hearts the joy of the sovereign, gracious love of the holy God for unworthy sinners—for you.

There are times when a child of God confesses that his faith is something that he knows. But because of trial and struggle and, worse, complacency, his faith is not something that he experiences as a vibrant reality in his heart.

Then there is a key that the Holy Spirit must use to unlock our hard and indifferent hearts. That key is to show us our need, to show us that we are sinners—hell-deserving, awful sinners—saved by grace alone.

The message of the wonder of great joy is brought to shepherds, only to shepherds, only to those possessing the spiritual attitude (the lowly, humble, knowing their need) shepherds. Our minds can be stuffed with learning, our hands full of things, our hearts merry with entertainment and holiday cheer—but what will that profit us when we die? It is Jesus, both Savior and Lord,

whom we must have today. Then we have great joy, abiding, lasting joy and a quietness and calm in our souls.

So, let us go to Bethlehem, to the fields and hills of Bethlehem, in the dark night in which Jesus was born, to hear, truly to hear, the message of great joy that came to shepherds.

You do not have an angel from the realms of glory to wing his flight to give you this message today. You have something much better. You have the Holy Scriptures. If you do not think that is better, that is, the Bible over heavenly angels, then you do not understand what the Bible is. It is the more sure word. It is the living word to which we do well to take heed in the darkness of this present world (II Pet. 1). It is the dynamo of the Holy Spirit to bring the good news of great joy into our hearts, to bring it to us personally, exactly where we are. Afraid? Guilty? Job lay-off? Burdened? Lonely? Possessing a secret you do not want anyone to know about? To you, a sinner, is brought the good news of great joy, of salvation by grace alone.

It had come to this. We were afraid of the Holy God. Our sin had thoroughly alienated us from God. An angel was then sent by God with the greatest news the world could ever hear or would ever hear. A virgin had just given birth on a barn floor to a son. And that son was mighty God in the human flesh. Angels are now sent to shepherds who are in the fields nearby. Shepherds are of the lowliest class. They are poor. They had a hard life. They were looked down upon, and they were avoided because of their smell. They lived with their sheep.

The message of the angel of the birth of Jesus Christ was sent not to King Herod, as he that night walked the marble floors of the palace, insane for power. It was not sent by God to Pharisees, sleeping soundly that night on a pillow of their own good works. It was not sent to the wealthy who were exhausted in their beds that night after pursuing the vanishing gold and silver of this world. But it was sent to shepherds. Shepherds who were young. The virgin Mary was young. She was a teenager. And so were the shepherds. They were older children—junior high children and up. We read in I Samuel 16:11, “Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep.” Shepherds were young, uneducated, inexperienced, not having gained the strength and experience of years. They were boys. They were poor.

Why does God send the message of the birth of Jesus to shepherds? The answer is: because, no matter who you are, your circumstances, job, education, experience—only when you are humbled before God and know your nothingness as a sinner can you embrace Jesus Christ and the marvel of His birth. Shepherds here are a picture of the remnant of God’s grace, those who, along with aged Simeon and Anna, Zachariah and Elisabeth, and Joseph, were looking for the Consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25). This is very striking, very comforting. In the dark days when it appeared that hope in God was totally lost, there were not only aged saints, but there were also young boys who hung on the promise made long ago: Your God will come and He will save you. Behold the Lamb of God.

Suddenly, as the shepherds watched in the dark night, the glory of God shone all around them: “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid” (v. 9). Note that it was not just the angel that came upon

them but the glory of the Lord. Angels themselves are exceedingly glorious. They are always around the throne of God. They come from the presence of God. They reflect God's glory and heavenly brilliance. And whenever an angel appears, this is what is felt. But in addition, there was a Shekinah, an aura of the glory of Jehovah. "My glory," says God, "which I give to no other." The glory that Jesus had with the Father—God's glory, something of divine glory—came down that night upon those hills.

And the shepherds were sore afraid. No wonder. Afraid means phobia, sore afraid—mega phobia. They trembled. All of a sudden, in the dark night, the God who was always there revealed part (just a little part) of His light and brilliance. He sent an angel (just one of those created beings) as God's worshiper. The son of the morning. The eyes of the shepherds popped out, and they shook in fear. But that fear was and is Adam's fear. It is our fear. It is a sinner's fear. It is the fear of the sinner before the holy God. It was the glory that exposed them. The light of the angel and the glory of God not only exposed the blades of grass on the hill, but it exposed also what was hidden within their hearts. "Adam, where art thou?" "I was afraid and I hid myself, for I am naked." The light of God exposes us. It shines into the cracks and crevices. It exposes everything—the secrets within. You cannot cover them up.

The light around the shepherds brought to their sight what they wanted hidden, and it not only exposed but threatened them with destruction. For it is a holy light. And when it gets near to us it burns. The shepherds had great fear. What fear? The fear of the sinner b