

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 35

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 35 is a compact, exquisitely crafted poem of eight verses depicting the transformative reversal that accompanies the LORD's return to Zion with His redeemed people. The chapter opens with the physical creation responding in joy to the LORD's coming glory (vv. 1–2), moves immediately into a summons to strengthen the faint and fearful among God's people (vv. 3–4), then catalogues a series of miraculous healings — blind eyes, deaf ears, lame limbs, mute tongues — that accompany the divine arrival (vv. 5–6a). These healings extend outward into the transformation of the physical landscape itself: desert springs, burning sand becoming pools, parched ground yielding water and grass (vv. 6b–7). The final movement (vv. 8–10) introduces the Way of Holiness — a highway through the wilderness on which the redeemed of the LORD travel with singing, with everlasting joy, arriving at Zion where sorrow and sighing flee forever.

The chapter stands in deliberate contrast to its immediate neighbors. Isaiah 34 is a chapter of devastating judgment against the nations (specifically Edom as their representative), depicting desolation, smoke, and wild beasts inheriting the ruins. Isaiah 35 answers 34 with its polar opposite: where 34 showed creation becoming chaos, 35 shows chaos becoming new creation. Structurally, Isaiah 35 also anticipates and parallels Isaiah 40–55 (sometimes called Deutero-Isaiah), sharing key vocabulary — the blossoming desert, the highway, the strengthened hands and weak knees, the ransomed of the LORD returning with joy — suggesting it functions as a thematic hinge or overture to the great consolation chapters that follow. Within the canonical shape of Isaiah, chapter 35 previews what 40–55 will develop: the new exodus, the return from exile, and the ultimate eschatological restoration of God's people.

This Text — Intent

Isaiah 35 is not primarily a doctrinal statement about eschatology; it is a pastoral summons to courage addressed to people currently experiencing weakness, fear, and apparent abandonment. The intent is twofold and tightly interwoven: first, to display the certain coming of God's transforming glory with such vividness that the reader is moved from fear to confident expectation; second, to call the people — specifically those with faint hands, weak knees, and fearful hearts (v. 4) — to receive and transmit that assurance now, before the fulfillment arrives. God is seeking to produce in the reader a reorientation of the affections: from fear-driven paralysis to joy-anchored courage. The vision of the homecoming (v. 10) is not offered as theological information about the end times but as

fuel for present endurance. The hearer is meant to see the joy so clearly that it re-orders everything between now and then.

Subject Sentence: The LORD's coming glory transforms wilderness into highway and exile into everlasting homecoming.

Primary Claim: God is calling His fearful, faint-hearted people to strengthen their hands and steady their knees by fixing their sight on the certain, transforming arrival of His glory — the full reversal of every curse, culminating in the redeemed returning home with joy that swallows all sorrow.

Interpretive Evaluation

The New Testament's Use of Isaiah 35 and Its Implications

The most significant interpretive question for Isaiah 35 is its referent: what does this reversal depict, and when does it occur? Three broad readings exist, and they bear directly on how the passage is preached.

A *historical-typological* reading (dominant in Reformed exegesis) understands the primary historical referent as the return from Babylonian exile, with the imagery functioning as idealized, poetic heightening of that event — and recognizes that the New Testament's use of this material extends its fulfillment into the ministry of Jesus and the consummation of all things. This reading is not reductionistic: the imagery surpasses any historical return from Babylon, which is precisely why Matthew 11:2–6 deploys it. When John the Baptist's disciples ask whether Jesus is “the one who is to come,” Jesus answers by citing the healings of Isaiah 35:5–6 — blind see, lame walk, deaf hear — as the evidential signature of God's transforming arrival. This means the fulfillment of Isaiah 35 is not merely future; it has already begun in Christ's ministry, continues in the age of the Spirit, and will be consummated at the final restoration. The Reformed reading holds all three horizons together: Isaiah 35 is about what God was doing in the return from exile, what He was doing in the incarnation, and what He will do at the end. To collapse it into one horizon is to miss the canonical richness.

A *dispensational* reading typically assigns Isaiah 35 to a future millennial kingdom in which the physical land of Israel is transformed and physical Jews return in blessing. This reading captures the passage's genuine futurity and its concrete, embodied imagery — the physical healings, the literal geography — and these emphases should not be dismissed. The passage is *not* purely spiritual; the healings are real healings, the highway is a real highway, the joy is embodied joy. However, the dispensational reading risks two errors: first, delaying the fulfillment past the New Testament's own identification of it (Jesus in

Matthew 11 does not say, “these things will be fulfilled in the millennium”; he says, “Go and tell John what you hear and see”); second, severing the passage from its canonical function as an overture to Isaiah 40–55 and its direct fulfillment in Christ’s ministry. The physical and embodied dimensions should be *retained*, but located within the already-not-yet framework of Christ’s inaugurated kingdom, not quarantined to a future millennial slot.

A *purely spiritualized* reading, sometimes found in older allegorical traditions, treats the healings and the desert transformation as metaphors for spiritual renewal with no embodied referent. This reading is **refuted** by the passage itself and by the New Testament’s deployment of it. Jesus cites *actual* healings as the fulfillment of Isaiah 35. The passage is not saying “your spiritual condition will improve”; it is saying that God’s arrival produces real, physical, embodied reversal of the curse. Any preaching of Isaiah 35 that reduces it to inward spiritual experience without embodied redemptive significance has lost the passage’s claim.

The Reformed verdict: Isaiah 35 is a poem of *comprehensive, eschatological reversal*, with its fulfillment inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 11, Luke 7), continuing in the age of the Spirit (Acts 2; the healing ministry of the church as foretaste), and consummated in the new creation (Revelation 21–22). Preach it as already-not-yet: God has arrived in Christ, the healings have begun, the highway is open, and the redeemed are even now making their way home — but the fullness of v. 10 (everlasting joy, no sorrow, no sighing) awaits the final consummation.

Key Canonical Support

- **Matthew 11:2–6** — Jesus cites the specific healings of Isaiah 35:5–6 as his answer to John’s question “Are you the one who is to come?” — the clearest New Testament identification of Isaiah 35’s fulfillment in Christ’s ministry; the healings are not metaphors but signs of the kingdom’s arrival.
- **Isaiah 40:1–11** — The great consolation overture picks up Isaiah 35’s vocabulary (comfort, highway, the coming LORD, the return of the redeemed) and develops it; reading the two chapters together establishes Isaiah 35 as the thematic preview of the entire consolation movement.
- **Hebrews 12:12–14** — Citing Isaiah 35:3 directly (“strengthen your feeble hands and weak knees”), the author applies the passage to perseverance in the present age under trial — confirming that Isaiah 35’s pastoral summons is live and applicable in the church now, not only at consummation.
- **Revelation 21:1–5; 22:1–5** — The final vision of the new creation picks up the desert-to-garden transformation, the end of sorrow and crying, and the fulfilled homecoming of God’s people — confirming that Isaiah 35’s promise finds its ultimate horizon in the consummation of all things.

- **Isaiah 34:1–17 (immediate context)** — The desolation chapter immediately preceding; Isaiah 35’s reversal is intelligible in its full force only against the devastation of chapter 34; together they form a diptych of judgment and glory, chaos and new creation.

Aim: To move readers from fear-driven paralysis to joy-anchored endurance by displaying the certain, comprehensive reversal God has inaugurated in Christ and will consummate in the new creation — so that they strengthen their hands and steady their knees today.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
35:1	The wilderness and desert will rejoice; the arid land will blossom like the crocus	Creation itself responds with joy to the coming glory; the reversal begins with the physical world
35:2	The desert will blossom abundantly with joy and exultation; the glory of Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon will be given to it; they shall see the glory of the LORD	The glory language links creation’s renewal to the divine presence; seeing is central — the reversal is visible
35:3	Strengthen the weak hands; make firm the feeble knees	Pastoral summons to the community; the vision of coming glory issues in a present command to strengthen one another
35:4	Say to those with an anxious heart: “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”	The command to speak courage; the ground of courage is the certain coming of God — as judge and savior simultaneously
35:5	Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped	The healings begin; these are the signs Jesus cites in Matthew 11; they are the signature of God’s arrival
35:6a	Then the lame man shall leap like a deer, and the	The healings extend to mobility and speech; the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
35:6b–7	tongue of the mute sing for joy For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand becomes a pool, the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals... grass becomes reeds and rushes	bodily reversal is total; the response is song The physical landscape participates in the reversal; the desolate becomes fruitful; even the domain of wild beasts is reclaimed
35:8	And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; it shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray	The Way of Holiness — a prepared, safe, exclusive path for God’s redeemed; even the simple will not lose it
35:9	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	The dangers of the wilderness are excluded; the Way is secured; only the redeemed travel it
35:10	And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away	The homecoming; the destination is Zion; the character of the arrival is everlasting joy; the final state is the permanent expulsion of all sorrow

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	35:1–2	Creation Responds: The Desert Blooms at the Coming Glory
2	35:3–4	The Pastoral Command: Strengthen the Weak, for Your God Is Coming

Division	Verses	Label
3	35:5–7	The Signs of Arrival: Healings, Springs, and the Reversal of the Curse
4	35:8–10	The Way Home: The Ransomed Return to Zion with Everlasting Joy

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD’s coming glory transforms wilderness into highway and exile into everlasting homecoming.

Primary Claim: God is calling His fearful, faint-hearted people to strengthen their hands and steady their knees by fixing their sight on the certain, transforming arrival of His glory — the full reversal of every curse, culminating in the redeemed returning home with joy that swallows all sorrow.

Applications (Five)

1. Receive the vision before you try to live by it. (*Mind/Belief*) Isaiah 35 does not open with a command; it opens with a vision. The desert blooms, the crocus bursts, the glory of the LORD appears — all before a single exhortation is issued. The structure is deliberate: you cannot obey verse 3 without first having seen verses 1–2. The first application is simply this: sit with the vision long enough to be moved by it. Too many believers attempt courage without having first let the sight of God’s certain arrival do its work on them. What would it mean, specifically for you this week, to set before your mind’s eye the scene of verse 10 — the ransomed walking, singing, with everlasting joy on their heads, all sorrow gone — and let it be real to you before you try to be strong?

2. The ground of your courage is not your condition but God’s arrival. (*Mind/Belief*) Verse 4 is precise: “Be strong; fear not!” — and the reason is not “things are improving” or “you can handle this.” The reason is: “Behold, your God will come.” The basis of courage in this passage is entirely external to the hearer — it is the certainty of divine arrival, not the management of present circumstances. This means that the believer who says “I cannot be strong because my circumstances are too hard” has the wrong frame entirely. The weakness of your knees is not the issue; the coming of your God is the issue. Repentance from self-assessment as the ground of courage, and reorientation to divine promise as the ground of courage, is the specific cognitive renewal this passage calls for.

3. Name what is broken and bring it to the One whose arrival heals it. (*Affections/Worship*) The healings in verses 5–6 are not generic. They are specific: eyes,

ears, legs, tongue — particular broken things receiving particular restoration. The passage invites a specificity of longing. What is your specific blindness — what truth about God have you stopped being able to see? What specific deafness — where have you stopped hearing His voice? What lameness — where have you stopped walking in what you know to be true? What muteness — where has fear stopped your mouth from singing or confessing? Isaiah 35 does not say “things will generally get better.” It says specific broken things will be specifically healed. Bring your specific brokenness into the presence of the One whose signature is healing, and let your longing be shaped by His promise.

4. Strengthen others who are still standing at the entrance of the Way. (*Will/Behavior*)

Verses 3–4 are commands addressed to a community: *you* strengthen the weak hands; *you* make firm the feeble knees; *say* to those with anxious hearts. This is not a private application — it is a communal calling. There are people around you whose hands are hanging down and whose knees have buckled under sustained trial. The vision of Isaiah 35 was given not only for your comfort but as a word to be carried and spoken into the lives of specific people. This week, identify one person whose hands are faint and whose heart is anxious, and go to them with the content of verse 4 — not generic encouragement but the specific ground: “Your God is coming. He will come and save you.”

5. Walk the Way of Holiness now, as those who know where it ends. (*Will/Behavior*) The Way of Holiness in verse 8 is characterized by its exclusivity (the unclean shall not pass over it) and its security (even fools will not go astray). This is not merely a future road — in Christ, the Way is open now (John 14:6; Hebrews 10:19–20). Walking it means walking in the holiness that befits the destination: the conduct that flows from knowing where you are going and who has secured your arrival. The specific application is not “try harder to be holy” but “walk as those who have been ransomed, who are on a secured road, whose destination is already guaranteed.” What specific compromise, fear-driven detour, or unclean attachment is inconsistent with the character of a traveler on the Way of Holiness — and what would it mean to put it down today and walk?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 35 teaches that God’s glory is not a passive attribute but an active, transforming arrival — it does not merely illuminate; it heals, restores, and reverses. The passage reveals a God whose coming is simultaneously judgment (v. 4: “vengeance... recompense”) and salvation (“He will come and save you”) — these are not in tension but are the two faces of the same divine arrival, as those who oppose His people experience His justice and His people experience His rescue. The comprehensive scope of the reversal — physical creation, human bodies, the landscape of travel, the final state of the human heart — demonstrates that God’s redemptive intention is not the evacuation of the physical world but its transformation and renewal; the body matters, the land matters, the created order matters, because God’s glory restores all of it. And the final condition

depicted — everlasting joy, sorrow and sighing fled — establishes that the trajectory of covenant faithfulness is not merely the management of grief but its permanent elimination.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Isaiah 35 functions within the Reformed understanding of the covenant of grace as the clearest Old Testament expression of what Calvin called God's *paternal care* — God not merely making covenantal promises but personally arriving to fulfill them, at cost and with power. The passage resists every form of merit theology: the people in view have faint hands, weak knees, and anxious hearts — they are not depicted as warriors who earned the return but as the helpless who are ransomed (*padah*, purchased, redeemed by a paying of price, v. 10). The word *ransomed* is a commercial-redemptive term that anticipates the full Christological freight of substitutionary atonement: someone paid for this homecoming. The Way of Holiness, accessible even to fools who will not go astray (v. 8), pictures the grace of the new covenant — a way secured not by the traveler's navigational competence but by the LORD's provision of the road itself. Reformed theology's insistence that salvation is entirely of grace, from beginning to end, finds in Isaiah 35 a poetic, prophetic, proto-gospel display: the glory arrives, the curse reverses, the road is secured, the ransomed come home — and all of it is gift.

Main Takeaway

Your God is coming — not eventually, not maybe, but certainly — and when He arrives, every desert blooms, every broken thing is healed, every exile ends, and every sorrow is permanently expelled. He has already arrived in Christ; the healings have already begun; the Way is already open; you are already among the ransomed walking home. So strengthen your hands, steady your knees, and say to every anxious heart you know: *look up — your God is coming, and He will save you.*

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Isaiah 35 as future-only, thereby draining it of present pastoral force.** The most common mishandling of this passage treats it as a description of what will happen someday (millennium, new creation, eschatological restoration) without recognizing that Jesus himself identified the healings of vv. 5–6 as signs already present in his ministry (Matthew 11:2–6). To preach the passage as purely future is to preach it in a way that Jesus did not. The passage is already-not-yet: the healings have begun, the Way is open, the ransomed are walking home now — even as the

fullness of v. 10 awaits the consummation. Preach both horizons or you have preached neither faithfully.

- **Spiritualizing the healings into abstraction.** There is a strong temptation, especially in expository traditions that are wary of health-and-wealth misuse, to immediately translate “blind eyes opened” and “lame man leaping” into spiritual metaphors (blindness = spiritual blindness, lameness = moral weakness). But Jesus cited these as actual healings of actual bodies. The passage claims that God’s arrival heals real broken things — physical, embodied, concrete. The applicational move to spiritual blindness is legitimate and should be made, but it should be made second, not instead. Begin with the embodied force of the promise before extending it inward.
- **Preaching verse 4 as a demand for emotional self-management.** “Be strong; fear not!” can easily become a command to suppress anxiety or perform courage — exactly the opposite of what the verse is doing. The command to be strong is grounded entirely in the promise of God’s arrival: “Behold, your God will come.” The strength is not generated from within; it is received in response to the vision. Preachers who use this verse to call people to pull themselves together by sheer will have missed the verse entirely. Preach the ground before the command, always.
- **Missing the diptych of Isaiah 34–35 and losing the force of the contrast.** Isaiah 35 is a reversal poem. Its power derives in part from what it is reversing — the desolation, the smoke, the wild beasts, the unending ruin of chapter 34. Preachers who come to Isaiah 35 without having acknowledged what chapter 34 depicts will not feel the full weight of the reversal. At minimum, a brief acknowledgment that this poem answers a poem of devastating judgment is essential to preach the transformation with its proper force.
- **Reducing the applications to privatized spiritual comfort and missing the communal command.** Verses 3–4 are not a private promise but a communal command: *go* and strengthen, *go* and say to the anxious. If the entire sermon is about what Isaiah 35 means for *my* personal walk with God and never reaches the word “say to those with anxious hearts” as a command to be carried to others, the passage has been preached at half strength. The vision of God’s certain arrival is given not only for personal assurance but as a message to be spoken into specific people’s specific fear.
- **Using Isaiah 35:10 as a sentimental closing without letting it reorient the hearer’s current suffering.** Verse 10 is one of the most beautiful lines in all of Scripture — “everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” It is frequently quoted sentimentally at funerals and in comfort contexts without being allowed to do its harder work: to reframe current suffering as temporary exile on a secured road rather than as evidence of abandonment. The promise of everlasting joy is meant to

make present sorrow *bearable and meaningful*, not merely to console after the fact.
Let v. 10 be the re-orientation of the present, not only the decoration of the end.