

## TWO STRATEGIES FOR LIVING IN DARK, COLD DAYS (Isaiah 35:1-10)

One of my spiritual heroes was C.S. Lewis. He was a British professor and author. He published 30 books. Since he was a professor of medieval literature, some were academic works. Since he was a strong believer in Jesus Christ, most were religious books. His best-selling books were children's literature. They are still being read today. Lewis claimed, "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally – and often far more – worth reading at the age of fifty and beyond."

This past week I spoke with a remarkable mother who has nine children. She said that she and her children have just begun reading C.S. Lewis' seven-book series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lewis wrote the first book of that series in 1950. He dedicated it to the adopted daughter of his good friend, Owen Barfield. Her name was Lucy, which just so happens to be the name one of the key characters in the series.

The dedication reads in part:

My Dear Lucy,

I wrote this story for you, but when I began it, I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result, you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again . . .

I have concluded that I am old enough to start reading fairy tales again. While I am familiar with the story line, I have never actually read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and I have decided it is time to do so. Instead of reading them in the order they are now printed, which is chronologically, I am going to read them in the order that Lewis wrote them. His first book in that series was *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Last week, after I chose the text for today's message, I remembered a line from Lewis that I once heard, and I have since found it in that first book. Without going into all the details, Lucy finds herself in a strange land. She is addressed by a strange looking creature. From the waist down he has the appearance of a goat. From the waist up he appears to be a small man. His name is Tumnus. He tells Lucy that she is in the land of Narnia. He explains to her that in Narnia it is always winter but never Christmas. Think about that for a moment—always winter but never Christmas.

There is a sense in which you and I live in Narnia. Even if you make your home in Southern California, Florida, Hawaii, or a tropical island, this world is a dark place, a cold place.

Dr. Everett Piper, the past president of the Oklahoma Wesleyan University in Bartlesville wrote:

Today, do you shiver as you try to shelter yourself from the freezing winds of nightly news? Palestine, Israel: Always winter but never Christmas. Iraq, Iran, North Korea: Always winter but never Christmas. "Stimulus" spending and

National debt: Always winter and never Christmas.

Piper wrote those words years before the pandemic started, well before the woke agenda exploded across our country. Year after year it seems as though we are in a spiritual winter; the days are dark and cold, but Christmas is strangely absent.

When Isaiah was on the scene, he discovered that his nation was suffering through a spiritual winter. Love for YHWH had grown cold. The candle of spiritual illumination had been snuffed out, and the people groped about in darkness. In Isaiah 34, the prophet warned that judgment was coming upon the world. It is a chapter of thunder and lightning, a chapter of gloom and doom. In chapter 35 everything changes. The winter has passed. Spring has come. Light and warmth return. This 35<sup>th</sup> chapter is a chapter of joy. Scattered throughout the text you will find the words *glad*, *rejoice*, *joy*, *singing*, and listen to v. 10 from the NLT:

Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return.  
They will enter Jerusalem singing,  
crowned with everlasting joy.  
Sorrow and mourning will disappear,  
and they will be filled with joy and gladness.

When Jesus returns, Isaiah 35 will be our experience, but we are not there yet. While there may be light and warmth in our hearts, we still live in a land of darkness and cold. How can we survive the winter of our Narnian culture? I have entitled today's message, "Two Strategies for Living in Dark, Cold Days." As we move through our text, I will lay out the two strategies that I draw from the text.

### **Strategy #1: Anticipate What God Will One Day Do.**

I believe this 35<sup>th</sup> chapter will be fulfilled when Jesus returns. In his commentary on Isaiah, David McKenna does a great job of summarizing the chapter and showing what God will do in the day to come. I am going to slightly alter McKenna's wording.

#### *1. God Will Transform the Wasteland into a Garden.*

We see this in vv. 1-2.

I read that there are over 370 golf courses in the state of Arizona with almost 200 of them in the Phoenix/Scottsdale area. Many of these are called desert courses. That means if you hit your ball out of the fairway, you are likely to wind up in the desert. To save money and conserve water, those who take care of a desert course water the tee boxes, the fairways, the greens, and the area around each green, but they don't water elsewhere. From the air, you can see patches of green scattered around the desert. If you can get water to it, the desert becomes lush, but getting water to it is the trick.

God placed Adam and Eve into a lush garden. Their sin, in effect, turned the garden into a desert. When Jesus returns, He will turn the desert into a garden.

## 2. *God Will Make the Handicapped Able-Bodied.*

Look at vv. 5-6a.

I believe that Jesus alludes to this passage in Isaiah when He answers a question brought to Him by the disciples of John the Baptist. Look with me at Matthew 11:2-6. John was going through his own winter of doubt. He was in prison. He was pretty much a political prisoner.

To put it bluntly, King Herod was shacking up with his sister-in-law. John said, “Hey, what you are doing is wrong.” Herod’s sister-in-law, Herodias, who is now Herod’s wife didn’t like being called out. She wanted her new hubby to get rid of John. Herod didn’t really want to do that; so, he put John in prison instead.

John is cooling his heels in prison. He believes that Jesus is the Messiah, but Jesus isn’t doing Messiah-like things. He gets reports that instead of rising up against the Romans, Jesus is telling the people, “Love for your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Hey, if a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack for a mile, carry it two miles.” That is where we get the phrase “go the extra mile.”

John wants Jesus to crack some heads together and bust him out of prison. Jesus isn’t doing that. John is scratching his head, wondering if he got it wrong. In the winter of his discontent and confusion, he sends a message to Jesus: “Are you really the Messiah or are we supposed to look for somebody else?”

Have you ever been like John in that regard? You look around, and you don’t see God doing what you expect God to do. You are in trouble, and you don’t see God rushing to your defense to extricate you from your difficulties. “Hey, what’s the deal here?” You think God is not holding up His end of the bargain.

Jesus essentially quotes from Isaiah 35 when He gives John’s disciples a message to take back to John. We need to remember that the Kingdom isn’t all about us. When God is blessing other people, we need to rejoice with those other people as to how God is working in their life.

Jesus adds a little barb at the end of His answer. Look at Matthew 11:6. Do you ever get offended that God isn’t fulfilling the expectations you have for Him? Don’t get offended when God chooses not to abide by the job-description you have written for Him.

- God Will Transform the Wasteland into a Garden.
- God Will Make the Handicapped Able-Bodied.

## 3. *God Will Turn the Drought-stricken Land into a Delta.*

Notice Isaiah 35:6b-7.

We who live on the plains and prairies of Oklahoma know something about droughts. We know about how the absence of rain can wreak havoc on our crops and our ag economy.

Thankfully, we have had some rain in the past couple of months, but On October 4<sup>th</sup> KOCO news ran an interview with Gary McManus, an associate state climatologist. He said that we are currently in the driest period going back 100 years. At that point then

(two months ago), we were drier than we had been in the Dust Bowl, drier than the drought of the 1950's, and the dry period of 2011 and 2012. According to McManus, "None of those were as dry as the current period we are in."

I don't know if recent rains have changed that appraisal. Hopefully they have.

Living as we do in Oklahoma, we aren't really familiar with deltas. That is something you are more likely to find in a place like Florida.

According to the National Geographic website:

Deltas are wetlands that form as rivers empty their water and sediment into another body of water, such as an ocean, lake, or another river. Although very uncommon, deltas can also empty into land.

Egypt has deltas cause by the Nile. Unlike Israel who was dependent upon God bringing the rain, Egypt was almost always fertile because the Nile would flood and deposit rich sediment upon the land adjacent to the Nile, as well as water that cropland. The Nile flows south to north, and satellite photographs show a green belt the runs the length of the Nile, and then it forks into a delta as the river empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

Devastating droughts will be a thing of the past in the New Earth.

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#### *4. God Will Build in the Former Wilderness a Highway.*

Look at vv. 8-10.

In the ancient world, traveling from one place to another was a decidedly dangerous activity. Verse 8 assures us that on this highway God will build, the travelers will not meet up with lions, wild beasts, or anyone that might mean them harm. The only ones using that highway will be the redeemed who belong to YHWH.

Commenting on v. 10, Raymond Ortlund wrote:

All our lives we've just wanted to be happy. But all our lives something has always spoiled it. God is saying, "Trust Me enough to follow Me, and I will bring you home singing. I will overwhelm you with a joy unbroken and unbreakable, and your sorrow and sighing will run for it!"

The first strategy we have for dealing with the dark and cold days we face is to anticipate what God is going to do. We can anticipate it because He has told us what He is going to do. He didn't tell us when, but He told us what, and since God never lies and never makes a mistake, we can trust Him to do what He promises.

Sometime I record athletic events to watch later. For instance, if there is a Dallas Cowboy game or an Oklahoma State game I want to see, but I don't have time to watch it right then, I will record it with the intent of watching it later.

Some people who do that will avoid the news; they will not talk to people who know

the outcome of the game. They want it to be a surprise when they sit down to watch it. I'm not that way. In fact, I google the score and then decide whether I want to watch it. If my team lost, I'm not going to waste the time. Life has enough frustrations as it is. Why would I subject myself to what I know is going to be a disappointing outcome?

If, however, I know my team won, I can happily watch the game. If my team turns over the ball or misses a field goal or if the secondary gets burned on a long pass play, it's OK. That play can be forgotten or forgiven because I know my team is going to win.

In this life, we face disappointments. Sometimes others disappoint us, and sometimes we disappoint ourselves. Like John the Baptist, we look around and we wonder, "What is God doing?" When we keep in mind that the outcome has already been decided, that it is all going to turn out as it should in the end, we can handle those difficult times with much greater ease.

Our text contains a second strategy that we can employ to get through these dark and cold days.

## **Strategy #2: Participate in What God Is Now Doing.**

Look with me at Isaiah 35:3-4. These verses tell us three things that we need to do right now. These are imperatives; they are commands. As we obey them, we will be working with God in what He is doing.

### *1. With God's Help We are to Strengthen the Weak.*

We are told to strengthen the weak hands. The NLT tells us how to do that. It renders the beginning of v. 3 this way: "With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands."

The Voice Bible puts it, "So, with confidence and hope in this message, strengthen those with feeble hands."

Have you ever wanted to give up, to throw in the towel, to say, "Put a fork in me; I'm done"? But then, a friend comes along and says, "No, you don't want to do that." Your friend helps you to get some perspective. He reminds you of some things you have forgotten or helps you see some things you never realized. He gives you a new outlook on what is taking place in you and around you and even through you. You now have the hope to continue on and do what you are supposed to do and need to do.

Through this passage, God is saying, "Be that person of positive influence in someone else's life."

I am a person of limited abilities. There are a host of things with which I cannot help you. If you need something fixed around the house—plumbing, electrical work, a broken window or door, I'm not your guy. If your lawn mower or car needs to be repaired, I'm of no use. If you are having money troubles and you need someone to come in and help with your budgeting, I'm not going to be of much help. If you are having trouble with your math homework, the best I can do is call my brother who aced the math portion of the ACT.

If, however, you need to unburden yourself, if you need someone to talk to who will listen non-judgmentally, I am your guy. I'm not saying I have the answer to your

problem, but I do believe God can use me to at least ease the weight of your burden.

When I was a young man, I served as a chaplain at Baptist Medical Center in OKC. It is now called Integris. I had a supervisor who described me as having a non-anxious presence. In other words, if you are sharing something deep and dark and heavy with me, I'm not going to shift my weight uncomfortably. My eyes are not going to get wide with surprise. I'm not going to say, "No, you didn't!" I am going to listen without alarm and without judgment.

I am not there yet, but I aspire to be the man described in Isaiah 50:4. I want to have the tongue of one who is taught. I want to know how to sustain with a word one who is weary. For that to be the case, I need to let God awaken me in the morning and listen with the ear of one who is taught.

That is part of what it takes to strengthen the weak.

## *2. With God's Help We are to Stabilize the Tottering.*

Look at the last half of v. 3.

Have you ever gotten weak in the knees, literally? I remember one occasion in particular. It was September 11, 2001. I was in the office at FBC, Stillwater. The secretary announced that she just heard on the radio that a plane flew into one of the twin towers in NYC. We were trying to make sense of that. It sounded like a terrible accident. Later, she told us that a second plane hit the twin towers. At that point, we knew this was no accident. We were being attacked.

I drove home, turned on the TV and watched. I was dumb-founded by what I saw. I was standing when I saw in real time one of those towers crumble with each floor being pancaked by the one above it. My knees weakened, and I fell to the couch in front of the TV.

As a chaplain, I have watched as family members are told that their love one didn't make it, and their knees buckle. Sometimes they literally do fall to the floor overcome by the news they have heard.

What does it mean to make firm feeble knees? It means you become a source of stability in those difficult times that others face. Be the kind of person upon which others can lean when life shakes them.

## *3. With God's Help We are to Encourage the Fearful.*

We see this in v. 4.

Have you heard the line, "Be afraid. Be very afraid." I did some research to find out where that line originated. It came from a 1986 horror movie called *The Fly*. In the movie, a scientist does an experiment involving himself. Something goes wrong. He tells an acquaintance, "Don't be afraid." Another character, who realizes the depth of the problem looks at her and says, "No. Be afraid. Be very afraid." That line was then used to advertise the movie.

Our job is not to go around telling people to be afraid. We are not to peddle fear. Our task is to find the people of God who are afraid and tell them, "God's got this. God's got

you. Don't be afraid. He will come to your rescue."

The word *encourage* means "give courage to," and that is what we are to do. We are to give courage to those who lack it. We do that by using the words God has given us in this book. Our job is not to pump people up with cheerful platitudes or catchy slogans. We are to point people to God by using the word of God.

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul informs his readers about the Second Coming of Jesus, and he ends that chapter this way: "Therefore, encourage one another with these words" (v. 18).

To be an encourager, you don't have to be original. You just have to be faithful. Remember what God has promised, and then proclaim those promises.

As we close, I want you to return with me to Narnia. Narnia is that place where it is always winter but never Christmas. In chapter 8 of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy, who is the youngest and all her siblings are in the land of Narnia. They have been befriended by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. They are told that Aslan is on the move. Aslan is a lion. Lewis uses Aslan as a Christ-figure. One of the children asks, "Who is Aslan?"

Mr. Beaver answers, "Aslan? Why, don't you know? He's the King. He's Lord of the whole wood . . . Word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment." Mr. Beaver goes on to quote an old prophecy concerning the return of Aslan:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,  
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,  
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,  
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

By the end of the book, Aslan had returned, and so did Christmas, and so did spring.

You and I will live through some dark and cold days, but I assure you that Christmas is coming and spring is coming because Jesus is coming. If you haven't heard, let me be the first to tell you, Jesus is on the move.