

LESSON THREE

TITLE Advent – Joy

SCRIPTURE Isaiah 35:1-10

MEMORY VERSE

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

MAIN IDEA OF TEXT

When God works with power, his people experience joy.

BEGIN this time in prayer, confessing any sins you know of, thanking the Lord for the gift of his Word, and asking the Holy Spirit to guide your study.

1 GRAB THEIR ATTENTION

TEACHER TIP

Start your lesson by telling a story that relates to the main idea of the lesson to grab the attention of your participants. In this section, we have provided you with two options, but feel free to develop your own.

OPTION 1: CHRISTOPHER ROBIN

The 2018 film *Christopher Robin* brings all the beloved characters of A.A. Milne's books back to life for one more adventure. The film begins with Christopher Robin with all his friends from the Hundred Acre Wood enjoying a goodbye party for Christopher who is leaving for boarding school. Winnie the Pooh is concerned Christopher will leave and forget about him but Christopher assures him that he will never forget him.

But as the years pass and Christopher Robin grows up, he loses his sense of imagination and joy and doesn't return to the Hundred Acre Wood. He's married with a young daughter and is successful in his career, but his job is causing him to neglect his family. The family plans a weekend getaway at their countryside cottage in Sussex but, at the last minute, Christopher tells his wife he can't go because he needs to prepare for a presentation the following Monday.

Back in the Hundred Acre Wood, Pooh awakens and is unable to find his friends, so he decides to go through the door which Christopher came out of in years past and finds himself in London. By chance Pooh reunites with Christopher, who is shocked to see him. Christopher escorts Pooh back to Sussex and the Hundred Acre Wood. There, Christopher reunites with the rest of his friends—Eeyore, Piglet, Tigger, Owl, Rabbit, Kanga and Roo—and he begins to rediscover the imagination and joy he once had as a child. He also comes to realize that there is more love and joy to be found in family and friendship than in work.

Let's take a look at the trailer for this heart-warming film about the importance of family and friendship.

(Play trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OURpDxljZrQ> - extended trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m74pkFkg7e0>)

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *Think back to when you were a child. How did you experience childlike imagination and joy?*
2. *Like Christopher Robin, sometimes we lose our way. What's something you've strayed from and would like to return to? It can be anything—a hobby, getting up early, reading regularly, having a consistent date night with your spouse, etc.*
3. *Christopher Robin went on his adventure and discovered that family and friendship are more important than work. What helps you choose what truly matters in life?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: Christopher Robin had lost his way. Somewhere along the way he forgot the childlike joy and imagination that marked his childhood friendships with Pooh and the rest of the gang in the Hundred Acre Wood. Like Christopher we sometimes lose our way, too. We simply forget, and that is an all-too-common thing for us as people. We lose focus and forget about the things and people that truly matter in life. We can drift away from God with neglect and forget all the blessings and joy that are available to us in our relationship with him.

This week we're going to look at how the Israelites lost their way and how God brought them back to himself by his power so that we might experience his joy.

OPTION 2: "JOY TO THE WORLD"

"Joy to the World" is the most widely published Christmas hymn in North America and for good reason. This hymn, written by Isaac Watts in 1719 as a reinterpretation of Psalm 98 regarding the birth of Christ, has endured through the years because of its exuberant and celebratory lyrics. The call to joy resonates throughout the hymn where heaven and nature sing joyful praises over the birth of the Savior.

Let's watch a bluegrass version of this song, performed by the family band, The Petersens.

(Play song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASZnRoRihyc> - fade clip at around 3:27)

*Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.*

*Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.*

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. *People often use joy and happiness interchangeably. But there is a difference. What is it?*
2. *What is giving you joy this Christmas season? What are you looking forward to with eager anticipation?*
3. *What, if anything, is making it harder for you to find joy this Christmas season?*

Transition Statement from Attention Grabber to Text: “Joy to the World” celebrates the birth of Christ and the same celebratory tone found in that hymn can also be found in Isaiah 35:1-10 at the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah will come and God’s people should find hope, encouragement, and *joy* in looking forward to that day. The Messiah will reverse the fortunes of God’s people by bringing healing, restoration, redemption, and joy with him.

This week we’re going to look at Isaiah 35:1-10. Isaiah tells the reader to rejoice in the Lord at the powerful work he does through the Messiah so that we might experience joy in him.

2

SET THE STAGE

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find the historical, cultural, and literary context you need to properly interpret and apply the text.

OUTLINE

1. Creation transformed at the Messiah's coming (vv.1-2)
 - a. The desert, once dry, will rejoice and blossom (v. 1).
 - b. In full bloom a transformed wilderness will become fertile and glorious and all will give glory to God for it (v. 2).
2. The coming of the saving Messiah (vv. 3-4)
 - a. The weak and fearful are encouraged (vv. 3-4a).
 - b. Their encouragement is that the Messiah will come to avenge and save them (v. 4b).
3. The healing and restorative power of the Messiah on display (vv. 5-7)
 - a. The Messiah will perform miraculous healings, giving joy to those who will be healed (vv. 5-6a).
 - b. The once parched desert will overflow with abundant water and growth where there was none (vv. 6b-7).
4. The redeemed people of God journey to Zion (vv. 8-10)
 - a. A highway will lead God's redeemed people back to Zion and back to God (vv. 8-9).
 - b. Joyful celebration will mark the return of God's people to Zion and to God (v. 10).

CONTEXT

You would think the Israelites would have gotten the message. God led them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. Time and time again he intervened to rescue his people and show them more mercy and grace than they deserved. Repeatedly he spoke to his people through kings and prophets to call the Israelites to turn and repent. Sometimes they did but often they didn't.

FALLEN CONDITION & GOSPEL RESPONSE

FALLEN CONDITION FOCUS

We look for happiness through consumption of goods and having various experiences.

GOSPEL RESPONSE

True, lasting joy is only found in God's powerful work in the coming of Christ.

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find exercises you can use to lead your class through the process of Observation, Interpretation, and Application. As the teacher, work through all the exercises below to ensure you gain a good understanding of the text.

In this passage, we find the Israelites once again in a spiritual wilderness, wandering and blind to their sin. A life of fruitfulness and joy are nowhere to be found for them. The “land” they dwell in is dry, infertile and filled with sorrow and suffering. But there is hope because joy is coming. The Messiah will come to save and redeem God’s people. He will rescue them out of the desert and lead them back to Zion where there will be joy and celebration as God is reunited with his people.

Let’s take a closer look at this joy-filled passage and discuss...

- 1 The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.
- 3 Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
- 4 say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”
- 5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
- 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
- 7 The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
- 8 And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
- 9 No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
- 10 and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;

everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

OBSERVATION: WHAT DOES IT SAY?

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Go back one chapter to Isaiah 34 and read it. Compare and contrast what you see in that chapter regarding God to what is found in Isaiah 35:1-10. Discuss this with the person next to you or write down your observations.

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 2: IDENTIFY KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

Read slowly through these verses three times. On the third time circle the key words and phrases you see repeated. List those words and phrases below. Bonus: categorize the words and phrases you wrote down into categories (e.g., good, bad, about God, about creation, etc.).

OBSERVATION EXERCISE 3: SEEING THE IMAGERY IN POETRY

What are the prominent images Isaiah uses in the passage? Write them down.

INTERPRETATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Reflect on what you saw when you compared and contrasted Isaiah 34 to Isaiah 35:1-10. How does the bad news of Isaiah 34 make the good news of Isaiah 35:1-10 so remarkable?

Why is it important to understand the good news of the gospel and the salvation and joy we receive from Christ in light of the bad news of sin and our fallen condition?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 2: IDENTIFY KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

Based on the key words and phrases you wrote down, what do you see as the overall theme of the passage? How would you briefly summarize it?

INTERPRETATION EXERCISE 3: SEEING THE IMAGERY IN POETRY

What makes poetry such a powerful way to communicate? Where in this passage are you most affected on an emotional level by Isaiah's poetry? Explain why and how it helps you better understand the heart of God.

APPLICATION: HOW DO I RESPOND?

TEACHER TIP

In this section, you will find questions to choose from that will help your group consider how God is calling them to respond to the text. Help your group set measurable action steps.

QUESTION 1: There are many things that can steal our joy on any given day. Think over the last two weeks. What stole your joy (or had the potential to steal your joy)? What might you do differently to protect yourself from joy stealers?

QUESTION 2: Read Hebrews 12:1–3. How is this passage an encouragement to look to Jesus and find your joy in him? How might it help give you a different perspective on your circumstances?

QUESTION 3: What's one way you can give joy to someone this week? How would you go about that?

QUESTION 4: How could you use God's Word to remind you to, as Paul once wrote, "rejoice in the Lord always"? (Philippians 4:4). Look up passages from scripture that speak of joy and commit to memorizing at least one.

QUESTION 5: What's a short phrase you could come up with to help you remember that when God works with power, his people experience joy? Write that phrase down and put it in a prominent place in your home.

4

CHALLENGE

TEACHER TIP

End your time of study with one final challenge and prayer. Your final challenge should pull together everything you covered in this lesson and call your participants to action.

Advent celebrates the coming of Christ to this earth and it's a time for celebration. Like the hymn "Joy to the World" we can "repeat the sounding joy" in our lives as we celebrate how undeservedly good God has been toward us and the fact that he continues to be so for us every moment of every day. His love toward us does not rise and fall based on our performance or where we find ourselves in life, even if that is in the desert. The Israelites were in the desert, and they found encouragement and joy in the coming of the Messiah who would save and redeem them and bring them back to God.

We have every reason to rejoice in our lives, regardless of our circumstances. That isn't to say we should have a Pollyannish attitude toward our lives. We still live in a broken world filled with broken people. Following Jesus doesn't alleviate suffering. Pain is something we feel all too often. We still experience loss and grief when loved ones die or relationships are severed. Our time here on earth is marked by many tears that show us that this world—and this life—are not as they should be.

But there is a joy available to us that runs deeper than our circumstances. It's a joy that only Jesus can give, and it is a joy for which Jesus experienced unfathomable suffering so that he would get the victory over all that causes suffering, pain, loss, grief, and tears. A victory that would bring us back to God. Jesus suffered so that we might have a joy that runs deeper than our circumstances—a joy in him. At his first coming, Jesus won the victory and when he returns his victory will be final and forever.

LET'S PRAY

COMMENTARY

ISAIAH 35:1-2

In the *New American Commentary*, Gary V. Smith points to the total restoration God will perform through the Messiah that Isaiah prefigures using imagery from the natural world:

The introduction to chap. 35 shifts away from the themes of total devastation of the earth, the sword being filled with blood, and the destruction of mankind (the focus of chap. 34), to the opposite themes of an inhabited city, a fertile land, and a joyful life. This paragraph is characterized by imperfect verbs and the repetition of vocabulary of “rejoicing” (t g l), “blossoming” (tipra), and “splendor” (h dar). God’s transformation of the dry and dead wilderness was earlier associated with the pouring out of God’s Spirit and the establishment of righteousness and peace on the earth (32:15–16; cf. 29:17–19). Later these same deeds will appear as evidence of the “new things” that God will do for his people (43:19–20). Joy and gladness are consistent responses to God’s salvific work throughout this book, while the blossoming of plants is less pervasive. The prophet was far more concerned with the theological effect of God’s work than the botanical, but the two ideas work together rather than against one another. God’s work will remove the curse from every part of the earth.

The prophet heightens the dramatic effect of God’s transformation by repeatedly emphasizing (35:2) the profuse blossoming of plants and the people’s shouts of joy. This transformation will bring the majesty and glory of nature (places like Mount Carmel and the beauty of Lebanon) back to its fullness, but the most significant change that will account for these transformations will be the full revelation of the glory and majesty of God himself. This could simply refer to the glory of God reflected in the glorious changes in nature (41:19–20; 51:3; 60:13), but other similar texts seem to indicate that God himself will appear in splendor in a visible theophany (cf. 4:5; 24:23; 40:5; 52:10; 60:1–2; 66:18). Those who will see God at this time are not identified. While one might guess it is the holy ones (4:2–4) or all flesh (40:5), in this context it is the redeemed (35:9–10).

ISAIAH 35:3-6

God sees the suffering, oppression, and plight of the poor and needy. From the Israelites’ suffering under the oppression of Pharaoh in Egypt to Jesus’s healing ministry, God gives assurance to the less fortunate, the outcasts, the oppressed, the sick, and the helpless that he sees them and will act on their behalf. Such is the point made by D.A. Carson in his commentary in the NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible:

[The] feeble ... fearful ... blind ... deaf ... lame ... mute [are those] whom arrogant, self-serving leaders have marginalized (5:20–23; 29:18–21; 30:12; 32:7). They are less likely to trust in themselves, and Yahweh encourages them and promises them “retribution” (v. 4) for all the wrongs done to them. The inauguration of God’s kingdom is clearly seen in Christ’s healing of these kinds of persons.

ISAIAH 35:5-7

Isaiah poetically speaks of the Messiah’s healing of people and places. In his commentary in *The*

Expositor's Bible Commentary, Geoffrey W. Grogan argues that we should see this as a prophecy to be understood both figuratively and literally:

The frequent references to spiritual blindness and deafness in passages such as [Isaiah] 6:9-10 and 29:9-12, plus the promise that one day spiritual sight and hearing will be restored to the people (29:18), incline us at once to interpret v. 5—and in harmony with it v. 6—in spiritual terms. We note, however, that Luke 7:18-23 seems to allude to this chapter, with our Lord's taking the language literally and physically. It can perhaps be understood at more than one level (see Introduction, pp. 451-52), for physical and spiritual sight and hearing have an analogical relationship, and in God's ultimate kingdom his people will have glorified bodies and a perfected spirituality. The healed lame man is likely not simply to walk but actually to leap (cf. Ac 3:8), and, whatever the first utterance of a loosened tongue, it will certainly give vent to joy!

ISAIAH 35:8-10

Matthew Henry, in his commentary on Isaiah, provides with great detail a description of both the path ("the way") and destination (Zion) of God's people:

The way of religion and godliness shall be laid open: it is here called the way of holiness (Isa. 35:8) the way both of holy worship and a holy conversation. Holiness is the rectitude of the human nature and will, in conformity to the divine nature and will. The way of holiness is that course of religious duties in which men ought to walk and press forward, with an eye to the glory of God and their own felicity in the enjoyment of him. "When our God shall come to save us he shall chalk out to us this way by his gospel, so as it had never been before described."

1. It shall be an appointed way; not a way of sufferance, but a highway, a way into which we are directed by a divine authority and in which we are protected by a divine warrant. It is the King's highway, the King of Kings' highway, in which, though we may be waylaid, we cannot be stopped. The way of holiness is the way of God's commandments; it is (as highways usually are) the good old way, Jer. 6:16.
2. It shall be an appropriated way, the way in which God will bring his own chosen to himself, but the unclean shall not pass over it, either to defile it or to disturb those that walk in it. It is a way by itself, distinguished from the way of the world, for it is a way of separation from, and nonconformity to, this world. It shall be for those whom the Lord has set apart for himself (Ps. 4:3), shall be reserved for them: The redeemed shall walk there, and the satisfaction they take in these ways of pleasantness shall be out of the reach of molestation from an evil world. The unclean shall not pass over it, for it shall be a fair way; those that walk in it are the undefiled in the way, who escape the pollution that is in the world.
3. It shall be a straight way: The wayfaring men, who choose to travel in it, though fools, of weak capacity in other things, shall have such plain directions from the word and Spirit of God in this way that they shall not err therein; not that they shall be infallible even in their own conduct, or that they shall in nothing mistake, but they shall not be guilty of any fatal misconduct, shall not so miss their way but that they shall recover it again, and get well to their journey's end. Those that are in the narrow way, though some may fall into one path and others into another, not all equally right, but all meeting at last in the same end, shall yet never fall into the broad way again; the Spirit of truth shall lead them into all truth that is necessary for them. Note, The way to heaven is a plain way, and easy to hit. God has chosen the foolish things of the world, and made

them wise to salvation. Knowledge is easy to him that understands.

4. It shall be a safe way: No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast (Isa. 35:9), none to hurt or destroy. Those that keep close to this way keep out of the reach of Satan the roaring lion, that wicked one touches them not. Those that walk in the way of holiness may proceed with a holy security and serenity of mind, knowing that nothing can do them any real hurt; they shall be quiet from the fear of evil. It was in Hezekiah's days, some time after the captivity of the ten tribes, that God, being displeased with the colonies settled there, sent lions among them, 2 Kgs. 17:25. But Judah keeps her integrity, and therefore no lions shall be there. Those that walk in the way of holiness must separate themselves from the unclean and the ravenous, must save themselves from an untoward generation; hoping that they themselves are of the redeemed, let them walk with the redeemed who shall walk there.

The end of this way shall be everlasting joy, v. 10. This precious promise of peace now will end shortly in endless joys and rest for the soul. Here is good news for the citizens of Zion, rest to the weary: The ransomed of the Lord, who therefore ought to follow him wherever he goes (Rev. 14:4), shall return and come to Zion,

1. To serve and worship God in the church militant: they shall deliver themselves out of Babylon (Zec. 2:7), shall ask the way to Zion (Jer. 50:5), and shall find the way ch. 52:12. God will open to them a door of escape out of their captivity, and it shall be an effectual door, though there be many adversaries. They shall join themselves to the gospel church, that Mount Zion, that city of the living God, Heb. 12:22. They shall come with songs of joy and praise for their deliverance out of Babylon, where they wept upon every remembrance of Zion, Ps. 137:1. Those that by faith are made citizens of the gospel Zion may go on their way rejoicing (Acts 8:39); they shall sing in the ways of the Lord, and be still praising him. They rejoice in Christ Jesus, and the sorrows and signs of their convictions are made to flee away by the power of divine consolations. Those that mourn are blessed, for they shall be comforted.
2. To see and enjoy God in the church triumphant; those that walk in the way of holiness, under guidance of their Redeemer, shall come to Zion at last, to the heavenly Zion, shall come in a body, shall all be presented together, faultless, at the coming of Christ's glory with exceeding joy (Jude 24; Rev. 7:17); they shall come with songs. When God's people returned out of Babylon to Zion they came weeping (Jer. 50:4); but they shall come to heaven singing a new song, which no man can learn, Rev. 14:3. When they shall enter into the joy of their Lord it shall be what the joys of this world never could be everlasting joy, without mixture, interruption, or period. It shall not only fill their hearts, to their own perfect and perpetual satisfaction, but it shall be upon their heads, as an ornament of grace and a crown of glory, as a garland worn in token of victory. Their joy shall be visible, and no longer a secret thing, as it is here in this world; it shall be proclaimed, to the glory of God and their mutual encouragement. They shall then obtain the joy and gladness which they could never expect on this side heaven; and sorrow and sighing shall flee away for ever, as the shadows of the night before the rising sun. Thus these prophecies, which relate to the Assyrian invasion, conclude, for the support of the people of God under that calamity, and to direct their joy, in their deliverance from it, to something higher. Our joyful hopes and prospects of eternal life should swallow up both all the sorrows and all the joys of this present time.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

John Calvin and William Pringle, *Isaiah*, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

D.A. Carson, *Isaiah*, NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible.

Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah.

Matthew Henry, *Isaiah*, Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible. John A. Martin, *Isaiah*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary.

John C. Ortlund Jr., *Isaiah*, The ESV Study Bible.

Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New American Commentary.

R.C. Sproul, *Isaiah*, The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version.