

# WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS?

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ December 11, 2016



<sup>1</sup> The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; <sup>4</sup> 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.” <sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. <sup>9</sup> No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, <sup>10</sup> and the ransomed of the LORD 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. (Isaiah 35:1-10)

Dear brothers and sisters, let us walk in the light of the Lord,

I can remember growing up watching Disney cartoons, you know the short little 5-10 minute videos with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy? One of those short cartoons I remember watching was titled, “Crazy with the heat” starring Donald Duck and Goofy as they are trekking across the Saharan desert in Egypt and their car runs out of gas. Goofy, always the optimist, simply starts walking across the sand in search for gas. It isn’t long before both Goofy and Donald are dehydrated and start to see mirages. What they realize is that these mirages do nothing to quench their thirst, but are rather just figments of their imagination. What they need is a real oasis, where they can quench their thirst and figure a way out.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been in a situation like that, a situation where you’re in the middle of nowhere, no cell service, no water, no hope in sight. But imagine if you were in a situation like that, and imagine what might you look for to get out of it. In short, you would need a real oasis. But what makes an oasis an oasis? What makes an oasis good?

Perhaps, we’ve never actually been in a spot where we have been in danger from dying of thirst. But when we consider the words before us from Isaiah, he describes a different kind of desert. He describes a desert that is not a physical desert, but a spiritual desert. And just like one would look for an oasis in a physical desert, we would want to look for a spiritual oasis. But not all oasis’s are created equal. Not all oasis’s satisfy equally. So the big question we must ask is WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS?

1. A way to strengthen
2. A reason to hope

The prophet Isaiah answers the question of WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS in the first lesson we read for this morning. I think it’s good to be able to review what it means from a physical standpoint before

we dig a little deeper into what that picture is talking about on a spiritual level. So to begin, let's go back into your imagination and think about WHAT WOULD MAKE A GOOD OASIS?

First of all, if we're thinking about an oasis in the desert, I think we would all agree that having water to quench your thirst and shade from the blistering sun are two immediate things that would make an oasis good. We know what it's like to live in a desert here in Arizona. Especially during the summer, what are we always reminded of? Make sure you have enough water. So the first thing that makes for a good oasis is a way to strengthen, a way to provide for the immediate needs that are facing a dehydrated person. But is that all that MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS? I would argue "no."

I think another important thing that MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS is to have some reason to hope. Think about it, if you're dying of thirst in the desert, you find this oasis and it quenches your thirst, you find some shade trees, to block out the rays of the sun, but then what? Even if there was a meager food source like coconuts or something else, how would you feel just being stuck at that oasis the rest of your life? I think what would make for an even better oasis would be a reason to hope, a reason to keep on living, some hope that you can get back to civilization.

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Isaiah first pictured a dreary desert, a parched land, a wilderness. But when we take a look at the previous chapter in his book, we see that he's not writing about the climate of the land of Israel, but rather their spiritual condition. One thing you may have gathered from the last few weeks in looking at Isaiah is how the Jewish people had abandoned God and his commands. And for that he allowed them to be conquered and taken away into foreign lands. This is the dreary desert he's describing, this is the parched land, this is the wilderness. But then he gives hope. What would a parched land need more than anything else? Water. What would a spiritually parched land need more than anything else? Spiritual water. And that's exactly what Isaiah says is coming.

**"The desert and the parched land will be glad, the wilderness will rejoice and blossom...Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool."** It is this water that will **"strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way,"** and encourage fearful hearts. But Isaiah is talking about more than just physical water flooding the land of Israel and making it a tropical paradise. Rather he is talking about living water. This will happen when **"your God will come...he will come to save you."** One of the ways Jesus describes himself is as the living water. The water that is coming to a dreary desert, a parched land and wilderness is none other than Jesus. He is the living water that would water not only the land of Israel, but also the whole world. This is WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS, it gives a way to strengthen.

But what does the devil look to do? He looks to convince us and others that this is just one of many oasis's that we can pick from. In fact he will try to make Jesus look like a run-down oasis that really doesn't have tasty water, it really doesn't have lots of good shade. And instead the devil will want us to look at other oasis's that he points out, saying that you can at least try them. How easy it is to see his point.

When we look around at our culture we see the different pictures of oasis's the devil paints. A different oasis that provides a way to strengthen you. The oasis of self-absorption - the world revolves around you, and anyone who disagrees with you is wrong, even if that someone is God. The oasis of sex - sex makes you feel good, and anything that feels good couldn't be bad. The oasis of money - work for as much money as you can, even if it gets in the way of family. The oasis of family - and nothing, not even

God gets in the way of family and family time. The oasis of popularity - look at how many friends I have on Facebook, or how many dinner invitations I have.

The one thing that all of these oasis's have in common is that they are never satisfied - there is always more money to be made, all those relationships take work. Many of these oasis's end up being purely mirages, they leave you thirsting for more. Perhaps the one exception is family. A strong and stable family can be a way to strengthen your life. But even with family, this is only temporary, because relationships between parents and children change. People grow old, and eventually die.

Only the gospel can provide a way to strengthen and a reason to hope. Because that little child, born in a Bethlehem manger 2,000 years ago brings the glory of God. Just recall some of the Christmas songs out there - from "What child is this?" to "Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful," many of them have put the truths of the gospel into song describing the baby born in a manger. This babe grew to be a man, and he opened the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the tongues of the mute, but even those were not his greatest miracles. His greatest miracle was bringing us from death to life, restoring our relationship with God.

This is WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS in the desert. This oasis strengthens our life not by giving us food and drink, house and home, but by giving us a peace that passes all understanding. It strengthens our life when we don't have enough money to go around, when the friends we thought were there for us aren't, when our loved ones pass away. Our life is strengthened because we know what is important, and we know where to find it - we find it in God's Word the gospel, which tells us about Jesus Christ, the living water.

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But this isn't the only thing that MAKES FOR A GOOD OASIS. A good oasis needs to give a reason to hope, not just right now, but hope for the future. And that's the second thing the kingdom God promises does. He gives a picture of a highway. **"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...Only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return."**

This would be completely different than many roads in Isaiah's day. The roads in his day were crooked and full of potholes. Many roads were dangerous for single travelers. But the road Isaiah is describing is nothing like that. It is a highway, it will be straight, it will be raised, there won't be any bushes for ferocious animals to hide behind, or corners to watch out for. And it will have one destination - heaven.

This kingdom that God is promising gives us strength and courage, because it not only gives us strength now, it gives us courage because of the future. This highway that we travel on is our Lord Jesus Christ when we walk in his path. Maybe you remember Jesus saying, **"I am the way the truth and the life."** Jesus is the highway we follow. That is why the only people who will walk on it will be believers. That's why there will be no fools on it, because spiritual fools are the ones who reject Christ.

Once more, the devil certainly tries to convince the world that there are many different paths to follow, there are many different religions, many different ways you can live your life. And it is true, there are many different paths to follow, but not all paths lead to the same destination. In fact, the only path that leads to the destination where we want to go is the highway Christ made for us. All other paths lead to the same destination - destruction. This is what gives us the strength and courage to sojourn on, not only in the weeks leading up to Christmas, but also in the months beyond Christmas. It gives us the courage because we know who we follow and where we're going.

Do you remember what happened in our gospel for this morning? John the Baptist had been locked up in prison, and he sent some of his followers to Jesus to ask him a question. **“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”** John asked the very question that is on the minds of people today. People who are asking the question, “is Jesus really worth following?” “Will Jesus really make a difference in my life?” And do you remember Jesus’ answer? **“The blind receive sight, the lame walk...the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”**

Christmas is more than just a feel good story. Jesus is more than just a good man to follow. Believing in Jesus does more than just help you get through this life. Believing in Jesus is the way you get to heaven. It is this courage that God gives in his promised Kingdom. Amen.