

Isaiah 35 || Come Home

Introduction

Good morning, Mercy Church! If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet, my name is John Hellams and I am one of the pastors here.

As you just sat down, I hope you noticed that there was something in your chair. If you didn't notice, you're probably pulling a crinkled envelope out of your seat now. Don't worry, it happens to the best of us. This is our Christmas Missions Offering envelope. As we've mentioned the last several weeks, today is the day we are beginning to give toward our yearly CMO. Each year, in this season of gift giving, we as a church family want to give our biggest and best gift to the mission of God which is why 100% of the gifts you give toward CMO go outside the walls of Mercy Church and into the advancement of God's kingdom around our city, country, and world.

Because of your incredible generosity over the last two years, we've been able to financially support local schools and organizations right here in Charlotte, helped 2 churches be planted and 1 church revitalized in the US, and supported around a dozen international church planters in strategic cities around the world. It's been awesome!

We believe he's called us to give away \$50,000 to the mission of God this year, more than we've ever given before.

Now if you're our guest, we don't want you to feel compelled to give to this. We're just honored you're here. But if you do want to be a part of our CMO, no matter how big or small, you can give in two ways. In person today by placing your gift in the envelope and putting it in the offering buckets when they are passed. Or, if you prefer, you can give online from now until the end of the year. You can find the link to give online on our homepage.

I am so pumped to see what God does around the world because of your generosity at the end of this year!

Speaking of the end of the year, Thanksgiving food babies have started to calm down a bit and the Christmas season is in full swing! Christmas shopping and parties are overtaking our schedules. If you're like my wife and me, we're finalizing all of our plans for going home.

Going home is one of my favorite parts about Christmas. Mom cooking delicious meals, dad making a nice, warm, fire, playing games, and just having a great time laughing and relaxing with family.

While it's one of my favorite parts of Christmas, going home takes some work. Making plans to get there, buying presents

for everyone, getting the car ready to go, figuring out where kids are gonna sleep, cooking meals. And while I always dream about the rest I'm going to get over Christmas, I typically go into the New Year more tired than before it.

For some of you going home is hard for other reasons. Home doesn't feel quite as much like home anymore because someone is missing. Maybe because of a divorce or a death. Or all your people are still around, but a relationship has never been the same since the fight you had last year. Maybe for you home has never really felt like home at all because of past pains that occurred there that, as hard as you try, you can't seem to overcome.

For many of you in the room, it's hard to even think about going home yet, because your minds are so full with everything that needs to get done before Christmas. You're anxious about performing well on that last project or closing the big sale so you can get that sweet end of year bonus. Or maybe you're just too exhausted to even care.

For all of us, our problem is the same. We've been trying to find our rest, our comfort, our home in all the wrong places and things. And as good as some of these places and things might

feel at times, they will always continue to leave us wanting more.

In the passage we're studying today, Isaiah 35, the Israelites were feeling pretty similar to us. God had called them to make their home in him, but they continued to find their comfort in themselves, their relationships, and their sense of control. So, God sent a prophet named Isaiah to warn them that if they didn't repent, if they didn't turn from their ways and follow him, God was going to send the nations to destroy them. Despite Isaiah's warnings, the people of Israel continued to disobey God so God promised to do exactly what he said he would. He was going to raise up the nation of Assyria, and then Babylon, to conquer Israel and take them into exile. In Isaiah 36, one chapter after the chapter we're studying today, the Assyrians show up to invade and conquer the Israelites homeland.

I imagine the Israelites were feeling a little hopeless in this moment. They were going to lose their home.

And yet, in this moment of hopelessness and uncertainty, Isaiah 35 presents a promise. The same promise presented throughout all the pages of the Old Testament. That a Messiah will leave heaven one day to take us to our true home. The first time he

comes, he will begin to heal our homelessness. The second time he comes, he will bring us to our perfect home in him.¹

That's our big idea for the day:

Jesus left his home in heaven so that you could find your home in him.

It's this hope that the Israelites needed to hear with the Assyrians right around the corner. It's this same hope that I believe all of us need to continue hearing today.

So, let's jump in to see how this is all going to unfold and why it matters for our lives. I'm going to answer three really simple questions for us today: what does the text mean?; what does Christmas mean?; and what does it mean for your life?²

First question:

What does the text mean?

¹ I am indebted to Tim Keller's sermon "Home from Exile" preached on December 22, 2013 for much of my thought progression throughout the sermon, including this idea.

² Ibid.

³ I am grateful to Mark Dever for this thought, and much of his explanation of the text, in his sermon "Reason to Hold On" preached on November 27, 2011.

I'll start reading in Isaiah 35, verse 1. The words will be up on the screen.

[1] The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like a crocus; [2] it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Alright, the book of Isaiah is prophecy, so it probably sounds a little different than what you're used to reading.

Let me explain what's going on here. Isaiah isn't referring to the Israeli citrus industry rollin up into the desert and making it grow fruit. People do a whole lotta awesome things in the world. In business, in medicine, in engineering. But all these good things that we do don't even begin to approach the glory of God being explained here.³

You see, in the beginning, God created Adam and Eve to live in perfect union in a perfect home with him in the Garden of

Eden. But Adam and Eve disobeyed God, so sin entered into the world. And because of this both the garden and all of creation were cursed. And they were literally banished from their home.

On the day being described here, what Isaiah is saying is that the Lord will one day reverse the curse of creation. There won't be deserts, or wildernesses, or dry lands any more. And no more thorns, thistles, or weeds.

In one of my favorite book series, the Chronicles of Narnia, the land is under the power of the witch and it's always winter. When the witch's power ends, though, the land blooms beautifully. I like to think CS Lewis got this idea from a passage like this. When the crocus blooms, it signifies the end of winter. And one day, this winter we are in, the brokenness we see all throughout creation, will come to an end.⁴

You might've noticed the passage describes three places particularly. Lebanon, Sharon, and Carmel aren't just roads in Charlotte you don't want to be on at rush hour. These were areas known for their immaculate beauty, strength, and order. When the glory of the Lord shows up at the end of time, Isaiah is saying everything will be perfectly beautiful, strong, and orderly. God will fully restore all of creation.

How is this going to happen? Check out verses 3-4.

[3] Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
[4] Say to those who have 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."

How is this restoration of creation going to happen? Your God will come and save you. The reason why all of creation is going to be restored is because God himself is going to come to earth to make it happen.

Remember what I said at the beginning of the sermon? The people of Israel have destruction and exile right around the corner. In Isaiah 36, the next chapter, Assyria is gonna roll into town to invade and destroy them.

Think about what the Israelites must have been feeling in this moment? The most powerful army the world had ever seen is about to show up on their doorstep. They're locking and securing doors, covering up windows, finding a safe place for their families to hide. Not sure whether they or anyone they know will be alive in a few days. It's not hard to imagine their hands being weak, knees trembling, and hearts anxious. But God says, be strong! Don't be scared. Not because you're

⁴ Ibid.

skilled enough to save yourselves. Not because you can will yourselves to overcome the approaching enemy. Not even because you can pay them off. But because I'm gonna come and save you.

Those are hopeful words for someone like me because deep within, I have a longing to prove myself both to God and others. I tell myself the lie that if I perform well enough that I will both earn and deserve God and man's approval. The gospel tells you and me, though, that there is nothing we can do to earn God's favor. He had to send himself to do what no one else could. To save us!

And if you are here today and you are feeling weak, this church is here for you. Because we gather as those who are weak together. We do not want you to suppress or deny your fears, but to address them with the hope of God.⁵

Though we try and try and try to reverse the effects of the fall on our own, only God can do that by returning. God will restore man's brokenness and weakness, God will restore all of creation by sending himself to save us. More on this in a bit.

Check out what's gonna happen when the Lord comes to save us. Verse 5-7

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

[5] Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; [6] then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; [7] the burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

In the day the Lord comes to save, *this* is what will happen. Sound familiar? When John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, he responded with all this stuff. It's what _____ read right before the sermon.

The miracles that Jesus did in his first coming are evidence that he is the Messiah, yes. But they are just a glimpse into what followers of Christ will experience in the new creation, after the second coming of Jesus. When God will not only open our eyes and ears but fill our vision and hearing with himself. When our legs and tongues and all of creation will be made right. When there will be no more death, or aging, or blindness.⁶

What hope this gives us no matter how terrible a circumstance might seem now. Some of you need to lean into that hope today. Whether you're experiencing pain from a physical

disability, sickness, or a broken relationship, there is no pain too deep that God won't heal. There is nothing too broken that won't be restored.

Let's keep going. Verses 8-10. Some of the most beautiful words in all of the Bible.

[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. [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. [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.

God will restore creation by sending himself to save us, he will make all things right, and then he will bring his followers to our true home in him.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Once again, I am indebted to Keller for his thoughts on the themes of home and exile in his sermon "Home from Exile" and his magnum opus, *Center Church*. Much of my thought progression for the remainder of the sermon was inspired by him.

It describes them taking a way to get home. To get back to God. What is this way? In John 14, Jesus said I am the way. He is the only way that leads to God.

Who are those who are on the way? Not everyone will be taken home. Only the redeemed will. This is the first time Isaiah uses this word. It implies that there is someone who was willing to pay a price for us. There is a redeemer and we are his redeemed.⁷ Those he paid for. We are also the ransomed in verse 10. The prisoners released after God paid the payment we were due. What a sweet promise this is for those who are in Christ!

Isaiah 35 ends with the ransomed coming out of exile and returning home. And if you stand back and look at the whole Bible, what you'll see is that the story of Israel is really a picture into the story of all humankind.⁸ It's a story of a people longing for a home while in exile. It's one of the great themes of the Bible. And something each of us continues to feel today.

You see, in the beginning, Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because of their sin. Israel is then exiled to Egypt but brought back home. A couple hundred years after Isaiah,

the Israelites were taken into exile again by the Babylonians, but were eventually brought back home. Even during the Roman rule, when the Israelites were living in their own homeland, there was a lot of talk about being in exile. Because home really didn't feel like home anymore.

At the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve lost their home. At the end of the Bible, God is recreating the Garden of Eden. And every human being in between, including you and me, is in exile. We are living in a world that's not our true home. You see, spiritually we are all homeless.

A lot of you know the phrase "a house in not a home." My wife and I have experienced this a lot recently. We moved a few weeks ago and it's taken a while for our new house to begin feeling like home. We're still trying to figure out which light switches control which lights. Furniture is in place and boxes are unpacked, but we still don't know exactly how everything is going to fit together. How we are going to make this space feel right.

Because home is a place where everything fits. Where everything suits you.

One of my best friends growing up, all of his family was just north of 5' tall. When I went over to their home for the first time, I quickly noticed that everything was a little shorter than I was used to. Though countertops were the perfect height for them, they hit about halfway up my thigh. While they could walk around freely through their furniture and decorations, I felt like Wreck-It-Ralph trying to get around with my 6'2" frame. Though I loved hanging out at my friend's house, I was always ready to get back to my home. Because they had created a place that really fit them. But it didn't fit me.

Why do you think it wears you down to be on the road? You're sleeping in a bed with a roof over your head. Eating meals as usual. It wears you down because you're not sleeping in your bed. It's not your favorite cereal or coffee mug you're using each morning. Things do suit you quite as a normal.

According to the Bible, home is meant to be a place of restoration. It's not supposed to drain or exhaust you. It's meant to nourish and strengthen you. To be a harbor.⁹

Martin Heidegger, a 20th century philosopher, said that we are living in a world that doesn't meet our deepest desires. We feel

⁹ Ibid.

out of place. We feel alienated. We feel like this world doesn't fit us.¹⁰

Why is this? Psalm 90 gives us the answer. It says God is meant to be our dwelling place. God is meant to be our home.

You see, we were built, we were created, we were designed to serve God, to love God, and to be so in awe of his glory that our lives are overcome with joy.

If we're doing anything else, it doesn't fulfill us. If your career or family is more important than God, you're turning something into a home that wasn't meant to be. And it will never bear up the weight of your soul.¹¹

This world as it now exists is not our true home. It doesn't suit us. It doesn't fit us. It doesn't meet our deepest desires. Because we were made for a place without death and destruction and disease and aging. The Bible says we are literally exiles here. We are living in a world that's not our home alienated from God, our true selves, one another, and all of creation.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Living in exile is a pretty hopeless thought. So, how in this world that is broken and not fit for us, can we possibly find hope? The answer is Christmas.

The second question I'd like to answer is:

What does Christmas mean?

Over the years, I believe we have sentimentalized the Christmas story. We put out the nativity scene every year. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the wise men all have chunky faces and rosy cheeks. And baby Jesus is there laying in the hay...awwww....with furry animals surrounding him. Look at that sweet scene. I bet Joseph and Mary were thinking, it's kind of nice out here in the stables. I sure am glad we aren't in a hotel.¹²

Wanna know the real story? Joseph and Mary are on the road. They had been forced to leave their home to go to Joseph's ancestor's home. Not for a birthday party or family dinner, but for a census. I imagine Mary wasn't too happy about this. She is suuuuper pregnant and having to take a long trip for

something she doesn't even want to do. All the moms and dads in the house can probably empathize with what she (and my man Joseph) are feeling right now.

So, they get on the road, they're almost to their destination, and Mary leans over to Joseph, "I think it's coming." They try to find a last-minute place to stay. Doors slammed in their face. No room. So, they settle for the best thing around. A dark, cold, nasty stable. And this 14-year old girl who doesn't have a husband gives birth there. No epidurals, no gloves, no doctors coming in to check every 10 minutes. She gives birth in a stable, surrounded by dirty animals. Jesus was born homeless.

Surely he'd find a home later. Nope. In Matthew 8:20, Jesus says,

[20] "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

He was born homeless and he lived homeless. And then he was crucified outside the city gate, a sign of ultimate exile and rejection.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

And right before he dies on the cross, he has an interaction with the Father. Jesus says the heartbreaking words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And the Father he has been in perfect face-to-face relationship with for all of eternity, turns his face from him. Not because he deserved it. But so that he could suffer the wrath that we deserve. So that he could defeat evil without defeating us.¹³

Jesus left the ultimate home in heaven, he came into darkness and coldness so that we could experience life. He experienced ultimate rejection and loneliness so that we could be brought into the family of God. He got the homelessness we deserve so that we could be brought home.¹⁴

What does Christmas mean? It's our big idea I stated earlier:

Jesus left his home in heaven so that you could find your home in him.

Let that soak in a little. Jesus left his home in heaven so that *you* could find your home in him. The perfect Son left his perfect home to come to this broken earth to be born homeless, to live homeless, and to die rejected and outcasted. He lived his entire life as an exile so that he could identify with you and me.

He did this for you! No matter how weak you feel, no matter how much pain you feel, no matter how unsaveable you feel, Jesus came to save you.

So, final and most important question:

What does this mean for your life?

If that's what Christmas means, what does this mean for your life? I want to conclude our time with 3 ways Christmas has to matter for your life.

First:

1. Just as Jesus gave his life so that you could find yours, the only way to find your life is by giving it to him.

Many people put up with Christmas even though they don't believe it happened. They look at it as an inspiring story they like to hear. If that's you, my question today is what does this story inspire you to do if you don't believe it? Have your children outside? No. If it didn't happen, why does it matter?¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

If it did happen, though, if he really did give himself so that you could find life, so that you could find your true home, we have to give our lives to him.

Other religions say you summon up your strength, you live a good life, and you hope you did enough to save yourself. Only Christianity says God had to come down to do what we couldn't do ourselves.

And the only way you and I can connect to that salvation is by giving ourselves to him. By repenting and surrendering our lives. By admitting there is nothing I can do to save myself. And then by giving your life to the only one who could.

In the world's eyes, when they hear what Christians have to do to be saved, we give up ourselves, our rights, and our lives, it seems brutal.

It actually is brutal, but it's the brutality of surgery. You don't go to a surgeon and say, "I have a problem and I need to be healed, but don't cut me. I don't want my blood and guts everywhere." Surgeons do brutalize you, but they do so skillfully, and only to the degree and only in the way you need to be healed.¹⁶

Repentance and surrendering your life to the Lord is like that. We must give our lives to Jesus in order to find the true life we were meant to live. The true healing and restoration that only he can provide.

That's the step I believe many of you need to take for the first time today. You came here angry with God for the things that have happened in your life or may even be happening right now. But your friend kept hounding you to come. Christmas is almost here so you thought why not, no big deal. But you've felt like God has been speaking to you today. Drawing you to him. Showing you how much he loves you. Calling you to come home to him.

If that's you, we're going to have some of our pastors and prayer team members down front at the end of the service who would love to talk with you. I urge you, don't leave without talking to somebody about what Jesus is doing in you. And that friend that hounded you to come today, you better believe they will wait around a bit after the service for you to do it.

That's the step you need to take today, and you know it. Come talk with somebody at the end of the service.

Other steps are for those who consider themselves Christ followers. Second reason Christmas matters for our lives is:

2. Just as Jesus was rejected to bring you into his family, you must be willing to be rejected to see others brought in, too.

For the follower of Jesus, the risk of rejection is very high in our lives. The message we proclaim to the world is offensive. Think about the message I just told you. You are broken and sinful and the only way to get right with God is by surrendering your life to him. That's a message that some people just aren't gonna like.

But you know what? Jesus doesn't tell us our success is found in how people respond to us. He tells us to share his good news, the good news about what Jesus did for us, and then trust him to save.

Y'all, we are in primetime sharing season right now! Christmas is next week and Christmas Eve is on a Sunday! It's like all the stars are aligning. People know this season is all about Jesus even if they don't believe him. It's a perfect time to share the gospel. Take your Christmas squares and give them to your neighbors, your coworkers, and your friends. But don't just invite them to Mercy and trust us to share the gospel with them. Jesus didn't tell his disciples to invite to come and see. He told them to go and tell. Share the gospel with them yourself. Yes, the Lord saves people after hearing a sermon, but more times than not, people are getting saved outside these walls.

And I'm about to say something else that is going to make a lot of you feel uncomfortable. A lot of you need to share with your family this Christmas. You're going home, everybody is gonna be all together, and you have that one person or maybe several who you know don't know the Lord. Maybe it's your dad or mom or brother or sister or your crazy uncle. Whoever it is, you need to share what Jesus has done in your life with them. Jesus was rejected to bring you into the greatest family on earth, his family. Some you need to tell your earthly families about that this Christmas.

Alright, final reason this story matters for us:

3. Just as Jesus left his home in heaven so that you could find our home in him, you must care for the homeless and marginalized in our city and world.

If Jesus was so concerned with spiritually homeless people that he was willing to move here and come among us and identify with us, shouldn't we care for those who are literally homeless and marginalized?¹⁷

Y'all, this is exactly where we got our local outreach ministry mission from. To send disciples to display the gospel to the marginalized communities of our city. The homeless, the

orphan, the unborn, the refugee, those in sex-trafficking, and disconnected youth. To love these marginalized communities as Jesus so radically loved us.

And yes, one of the ways you can serve these communities, both here and around the world, is by giving to them. 100% of our CMO offering we're beginning to take up today will go outside our walls to support and serve our partners in our city, our country, and our world. Many of you need to give extravagantly to this CMO in response to the extravagant love of our Savior.

But Jesus didn't just communicate with us, the spiritually homeless and marginalized, by showering down money and giving gift baskets for Christmas. He was willing to move here, to come among us, and to identify with us. Some of y'all need to be serving with our local outreach partners. And not just at our Serve Weeks a couple times a year, but all throughout the year. Some of y'all God is calling to move to a different part of town, to give up your dream home with a nice garage and backyard, so that you can live among those who are marginalized. Some of y'all need to consider moving your lives to join up with one of our church planting teams around the world. Some of y'all need to take the step to go on a short-term mission trip to see this missionary God we always talk about at work among the nations.

¹⁷ Ibid.

That was a lotta “some of y’alls” to take in, but I truly believe God is calling many of you to take one of these steps today. If Jesus left his home so that you could find your home in him, if you really believe he did that, whatever he is calling you to, whatever sacrifice, I promise it will be worth it.

Conclusion

Our passage and the whole Bible points to the same promise. Christmas means that Jesus Christ, God himself, left his home in heaven so that you could find your home in him. You can either go on pretending this world is home and face exile with God forever. Or you can realize you are in exile here and you need God to bring you home.

All of us can only hold on to one or another. We can trust ourselves for salvation or we can trust Christ.

For those who have already found their home in Christ, you need to live like it really matters.

For those who haven’t, I want to call you again to surrender your life to Christ today. You’ve been trying to save yourself, you’ve been making your home in so many other places, but they keep leaving you wanting more.

When I finally surrendered my life to the Lord, after years of living for myself and months of fighting him, I remember as clear as day the old hymn playing in the background. I’d sung

it a thousand times, but it rang true in my ear for the first time that day.

“Come home! Come home! Ye who are weary, come home! Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, o sinner, come home!”

Jesus left his home in heaven so that you could find your home in him. Come home, O sinner, come home!

Let’s pray.