

***“Thank God For Your Highway”***

(Isaiah 35:8)

The Third Sunday in Advent, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Pastor Espinosa

The Text: Verse 8 ESV: *“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.\***”*

Note the last part of this verse that I’ve highlighted. Some ESV Bibles contain this asterisk with an alternative translation of the highlighted portion.

***\*Or “if they are fools, they shall not wander in it.”***

The Beck/An American Translation offers this translation: ***“no fool will wander there.”***

The NASB translation states: ***“And fools will not wander on it.”***

The NIV translation presents: ***“wicked fools will not go about on it.”***

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Coming King, the promised Messiah, the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. There are relatively very few verses in God’s Word which remain uncertain, but in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 35:8, we have encountered one of them. The verse is about the way of salvation and deliverance. It is referred to as a “highway; the Way of Holiness, the Holy Way, or the Highway of Holiness.” We are informed as to who will travel on it and who will not travel on it. It is a startling and an important Scripture belonging to this eschatological/end-times/last things Word of the Lord and the now & not yet framework that helps us to understand that Scriptures such as these apply both to our time today and to the glorious last day when Christ comes again in glory.

As I’ve already begun to intimate, this verse certainly contains clear facets. For example, we know that the “unclean” will *not* travel on the highway of holiness and salvation. We also know that some people *do* and *will* travel on it. That is the unclean are off the road; the clean are on it.

The uncertain part comes in the last part of Isaiah 35:8 that I’ve highlighted for you. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod is currently leaning on the ESV as its recommended text so our publishing company CPH has prepared our bulletin covers with the ESV text, so that – in effect –

the recommended English translation of the Hebrew is: ***“even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.”*** That is, it is easy to read and to understand the verse as saying at first glance that “even fools will travel on this highway of salvation.”

There have been many attempts to justify this translation. Luther wanted to treat the word “fools” as meaning “simpletons” who in the eyes of the world are foolish for they believe in the Word of God which is also considered foolish by the world’s standards. Thus these “fools” are only fools from a worldly perspective, but from the perspective of faith, these people are actually wise (LW16:304). A later Lutheran theologian takes an even more simplified approach, these so-called “fools” are “even the most unlearned (Kretzmann: 343).” From a completely alternative standpoint, both the Greek translation of the Old Testament and the ancient church father Tertullian treat the word “fools” as *“the dispersed”* (Septuagint, Hendrickson Publishers: 869 & ANF 3:389). The Tanakh – the Jewish Bible – is the most generous of the translations: *“No traveler, not even fools, shall go astray [on this highway].”* Again the ESV translation that has been commended to us in our bulletin cover likes this approach. The *ESV Study Bible* defends it by saying, *“The highway is so clearly marked, even fools cannot miss it.”*

In my humble estimation dear Christians, these are simply wrong and for important reasons:

1. First Hebrew frequently employs chiastic structures or parallelisms to stress points. In this case, where the text is actually saying that fools will not be on this highway, it is entirely consistent with the first part of the verse which states that the unclean will not be on this highway. These are parallel and complementary ideas: the unclean and the fools will not be on this highway.
2. Secondly, the actual word being used for “fools” in the Hebrew is almost always – if not always – a word that means “fools” in the sense of the morally bad who despise wisdom and discipline (BDB 17). The Wordbook of the Old Testament states: ***“the vast majority of the examples is in the negative as in having corruption, moral perversion or insolence, to what is sinful rather than to mental stupidity (44).”***
3. Lastly, this meaning is entirely consistent with the clearer passages in Holy Scripture. Revelation 21 is powerfully clear:

*“<sup>8</sup>The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. <sup>9</sup>But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral,*

*sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."*

OK, but why does this matter? It should matter to us a great deal, because what appears to be the actual meaning, that those who are unclean and foolish in the sense of having moral sin will *not* be on this highway of salvation.

That is, what appears to be the correct translation produces the starkest and if we're honest, the most terrifying law. The fact of the matter is that you and I are the unclean just like King David who had to pray that the Lord would "cleanse [him] from [his] sin (Psalm 51:2)" and who prayed that the Lord would "Purge [him] with hyssop [the ceremonial plant used in ceremonial cleansings from skin disease]" so that "[he would] be clean (Psalm 51:7)."

The only reason King David prayed this way was because he was in fact in the condition of being unclean.

What about foolishness in the sense of moral failure and sin? Saint Paul describes his great battle with sin...he confesses doing what he does not want to do (that which he knew was wrong to do; that which he hated), and yet that was what he did and it caused him to cry out confessing his sinful condition (Romans 7)!

These words describe you Christian and they describe me. And according to Isaiah 35:8, we are those disqualified from being on the highway of salvation. In this respect, the correct, non-watered-down version of Isaiah 35:8 is horrifying and if we were left with only this we would surely spend our time denying the faith and running from God (though it would assuredly be in vain, because who can run from God?), but we would in fact already be in a state of hopelessness if this was all we were left with.

But as strong as this verse is in regard to the law, it is just as strong, if not stronger, in its Gospel. The fact is -- dear Christian -- there *are in fact* people on this salvation highway!

Remember, however, that *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and *all* have turned aside...there is none who does good, not even one (Psalm 14:3). Don't you see? Since all are sinners, then those who are nevertheless on the highway are also sinners. That is, this verse also guarantees hope for sinners! This verse guarantees hope for you!

So the real difference is this: some sinners are on the highway, while other sinners are not. Isaiah says as much in passages both *before* and *after* Isaiah 35:8:

**Isaiah 11:16: “And there will be a highway from Assyria For the remnant of His people who will be left, Just as there was for Israel In the day that they came up out of the land of Egypt.”**

But were not these remnant people of God also sinners? They most certainly were! But God provided a highway for them anyway!

**Isaiah 51:10: “Was it not Thou who dried up the sea, The waters of the great deep; Who made the depths of the sea a pathway For the redeemed to cross over?”**

But those who departed from Egypt and traveled on the “pathway”/highway through the Red Sea, were they not sinners too? Yes they were, but God provided a highway for them as well!

The focus then dear Christian is not on comparing people, but on knowing our relationship to the highway...it is all about the highway! It is the highway that impacts our true status. To be on the right road or the right highway as we all know makes all the difference in the world! It quite simply determines where you will wind up. To be apart from the right highway is to be lost and overcome by the status “unclean” and “foolish” ...because under such circumstances you are left to yourself, but left to yourself without the right highway, you are lost.

To be on the right highway, however, changes your status. The person on the right highway is not better than the person on the wrong highway; the person moving towards the right direction is not superior to the person moving in the wrong direction, but to be on the right road, the right highway impacts everything in your life.

In the summer of 1989 Traci traveled ahead of me to Denver while I wrapped things up at seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana before my vicarage here in California. She arrived safely, but in a very short time everything changed. I won't go into details, but all of a sudden we were having a family emergency. What happened next seems like blur. I called professors to make other arrangements to complete my classes, called a friend to help me load up the U-Haul truck in record time and in a matter of just a few hours I was flying down the road. There was a highway that led from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Denver, Colorado about 1,150 miles long and 17 hours in travel time. I will never, ever forget that trip on that highway that delivered me to the hospital and to my wife's side. One family member was shocked to see how fast I arrived. I was definitely on the right highway.

Your Savior ensured that He too was on the right highway: the Via Dolorosa or “The Way of Sorrows” that led Him to Calvary. It was His highway for establishing your forgiveness and peace with God. That highway was the basis for the Lord Jesus proclaiming Himself, “the Way [the Holy Way; the Highway of Holiness...we do not make it holy, He does because He *is* that Way] (John 14:6).”

Jesus is your highway, but hold on, don't miss this part: just as I had connections from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Denver, Colorado, Jesus has established connections to Himself. The Holy Highway includes the Word of Christ and the Sacraments of Christ. These are means, connectors, and highways that keep you on path.

Chapter 34 and 35 of Isaiah are really one prophecy. Chapter 34 is a threat from God against the nations generally while Edom (in south Palestine) is singled out as representing the enemies of God's people, but chapter 35 is also a general threat even against Israel who had been unfaithful, remember we are all sinners. Indeed, in time God's people would be exiled to Babylon! But then there is Isaiah 35 and we have this answer from God: a Highway would be provided God's people, a Highway of deliverance from exile to freedom! There would be hope given to God's people when God's people would be without hope.

We know that our futures in this fallen world include hardship; occasions when we must move very fast on our man-made highways to attend to serious needs, but when you enter into the Highway which is Christ (the Way), you end up merging with Him, you become united to Him just as you have already been buried with Him in baptism and raised in His life which is the Highway of Eternal Life. You're one with Him through His Supper and as this incorporates you into the Highway of Holiness your status changes: you are no longer counted as the unclean, but as the clean.

You are among the clean ones now, because Christ has put you into Himself. And when God sees you remaining in His Son and in His Word and in His Sacrament, then you are no longer -- in the eyes of God -- considered among the unclean and the foolish, but you are now declared among the clean and the wise, not for any wisdom in yourself, but on account of Jesus Christ, THE Clean One, THE Wise One, THE Highway... to God, to Life, to Hope, and to Love eternal...thank God for your Highway! And here's the real beauty of all of this: you now know the way for preparing for Christmas and for preparing for His glorious Second Coming...it is to be found on the Highway; it is to be found in Christ today...and this dear Christian is exactly where you are. Jesus has come and has put you into Himself. You're now on the Highway and in Him, you're clean and staying right on course.



