

WHEN GOD REIGNS

Doug McNett // January 25, 2026

Text: Isaiah 32 & 35 (ESV)

Big Idea: When God reigns, life's stability and direction are restored through surrender.

Well, good morning; how are we? Good, good! And a quick shout-out to all of you joining us in our online community. I'm so glad you are part of the Foothills Family and that you're with us in worship and studying God's Word from wherever—and whenever—you're tuning in. If we haven't had the chance to meet, my name is Doug; I'm one of the pastors here. I'll be hanging around after service, and I'd love to connect with you, hear a bit of your story, and help you get connected however we can. So please come say hi.

If you would grab your bible and join me in Isaiah chapter 32, I'll be reading out of the ESV this morning and chapters 32 & 35 is where we're going to be camping out.

You know, one of the things Isaiah does so well is expose the gap between what looks healthy on the surface and what is actually going on underneath.

Isaiah was speaking into a very specific moment in Israel's history. On the outside, things looked relatively stable. The nation was still standing. Worship was still happening. The temple was still functioning. Life, in many ways, was moving along as usual.

But politically, they were anxious. Spiritually, they were compromised. And instead of trusting the Lord, the people—and especially their leaders—were increasingly looking to alliances, strategies, and human solutions to keep themselves safe.

So what Isaiah is doing, is he's speaking to a people who were trying their best to hold it together on the outside. They were still worshiping, still

functioning as a nation, still going through the motions of religious life. But beneath the surface, something was deeply wrong. Not because they lacked information or because they hadn't heard God's Word, but because God was no longer reigning at the center of their lives in the way He was meant to.

And instead of responding to His people with some sort of a checklist for better behavior—or rather than handing them some holy techniques for spiritual improvement or telling them simply to try harder—God gave them a vision. He didn't begin with a vision of judgment—that would come—and He didn't first focus on their outward behavior. Instead, He gave them a vision of what happens when God Himself rules rightly. When righteousness isn't demanded from the outside, but established from the top down.

And, so this morning, we're going to sit with two passages from Isaiah. We're not going to rush through them, but we're going to let them show us what God was promising His people—and what He remains committed to doing. Because Isaiah isn't mainly asking, "What are you doing wrong?" He's asking a deeper question: who—or what—is actually ruling in your life? And once that question gets answered, everything else begins to change.

And so in the first 8 verses of chapter 32, Isaiah begins with a remarkably hopeful declaration: He says, "Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice." Now, like I mentioned before, I don't want to fly passed some of this. So, let's not look passed that first word, That word "behold." It's not their as filler word. It's a signal for us. Isaiah is calling his hearers to lift their eyes from the distractions and demands of everyday life, the daily pressures, the uncertainty of their time, and look toward what God is promising beyond them.

In the midst of political instability, and corrupt leadership, and spiritual compromise, Isaiah speaks of a different kind of reign—one that stands in contrast to everything they have known.

Now, historically, this mattered deeply. Isaiah is speaking to Judah at a time when their kings were, well, inconsistent at best and dangerous at worst. Their leadership was often driven by fear, self-interest, and political survival rather than trusting in their Lord. And the people felt it. As we look at the Scriptures, we can see how the way leaders rule eventually shows up in the lives of the people they lead. So, when leaders are unjust, instability trickles down into every layer of life—socially, morally, and spiritually.

So when Isaiah says, “A king will reign in righteousness,” this is not some poetic optimism. It is a radical contrast to the experiences of the people of Judah. He is describing a rule that does not exploit, manipulate, or fracture, but instead aligns with the character and purposes of God Himself.

And notice what immediately follows. Isaiah doesn’t leave this in theory—he shows what this kind of reign and rule would produce. In verse 2 he says that such a king will be “like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.” In other words, when God’s reign is rightly established, people are no longer crushed by life—they are covered. They’re given shelter.

This is really important. Isaiah is not saying righteous rule makes life easy. Notice that he still assumes wind, and storms, and dryness, and weariness. What changes isn’t the presence of hardship, but hear this... but the presence of refuge. See, under God’s reign, people are no longer left exposed. When God reigns stability emerges.

And for Isaiah’s original audience, this was deeply personal. They had placed their hope in political alliances, military strength, human strategies—but none of those things had provided real security. Isaiah is saying that true security, true peace, does not come from better circumstances, but from better leadership, from a righteous King.

Then in verse 3, Isaiah turns our attention from those external conditions in our lives to internal transformation. He says, "Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will give attention." What Isaiah is describing for us is spiritual clarity. Under righteous rule, people begin to see clearly and to hear rightly. People begin to see more clearly. They become more open to hearing what God is saying, instead of pushing it away. Where there had been confusion and pushback, people begin to understand, and they become more willing to hear what God has been saying all along.

And again, this isn't just intellectual understanding. Verse 4 goes on: "The heart of the hasty will understand and know, and the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak distinctly." Isaiah is describing a reversal here. Under God's reign, the inner chaos of the heart settles, and our speech is shaped by truth rather than confusion. Rashness gives way to wisdom. Confusion gives way to clarity. Fear gives way to truth. This is what happens when the right ruler is on the throne of our lives.

Then Isaiah does something really important. In verse 5, he exposes what false stability looks like. He says, "The fool will no longer be called noble, nor the scoundrel said to be honorable." That word noble doesn't mean wealthy or impressive. In the Hebrew, it refers to someone who is willing, generous, and rightly oriented toward what is good. In other words, Isaiah is talking about moral trustworthiness, not social status.

So Isaiah is saying that under God's reign, people who are self-serving or empty will no longer be treated as if they are safe to follow. Labels are corrected. Pretenders are unmasked. What looked solid is revealed as hollow.

In Isaiah's day, people with power, wealth, or influence were often treated as noble regardless of their character. But righteous rule brings moral clarity. Those who cannot sustain others are no longer elevated. Evil is no longer excused. Truth is no longer blurred.

And that matters deeply, because when we place our trust in the wrong leadership, we build our lives on something that cannot hold us.

That's true at a national level—but it's also true at a personal one.

When I become the primary authority in my own life, when my instincts, my fears, or my desires begin to lead me instead of the Lord, I may feel secure for a while—but it's a false security. It works until it doesn't. That's why false leadership always produces false security.

Whether it's out there in the world, or right here in my own heart, misplaced authority eventually leaves us exposed.

Isaiah goes on in verses 6 and 7 to describe the fruit of godless leadership: empty words, exploitative actions, neglect of those in need, and injustice toward the poor. These verses aren't random condemnations—they are diagnostic. Isaiah is showing what inevitably happens when God is pushed to the margins and human authority takes center stage.

But notice the tone. Isaiah isn't ranting. He's revealing. He's letting the people see the logical outcome of misplaced rule.

Then in verse 8, he offers a quiet but powerful contrast: "But he who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands." True nobility, Isaiah says, is not positional—it is directional. It flows from a life aligned with God's righteousness.

That means nobility isn't something we stumble into, and it isn't something others can give us. It shows up long before a moment of pressure—in the plans we make, the values we choose, and the direction we quietly set our lives toward. And when that direction is shaped by God's righteousness, it gives us something firm to stand on when everything else starts to shift.

Now, at this point, it would be easy to read Isaiah 32 and think only in political terms. But Isaiah is doing something deeper. He is not merely promising a better system in the future. He is pointing toward a better King. And from our vantage point, we know Isaiah is looking beyond any earthly ruler. He is anticipating the reign of Jesus. A King whose righteousness is not partial or temporary, but is perfect and eternal. A King who does not merely administer justice, but embodies it.

And this is where Isaiah 32 presses in on us—not as a political text, but as a spiritual one. Because the question Isaiah raises is not simply, “Who is on the throne in Jerusalem?” but “Who is reigning in the human heart?” Who is reigning in our hearts?

Isaiah is addressing what happens at the personal level. When God does not reign at the center, life becomes fragmented. Priorities compete. Desires pull in opposite directions. We may appear functional, even faithful on the outside, but underneath there is drift.

Isaiah is showing us that righteousness is not produced by pressure or performance. It flows from proper reign. When God rules, stability emerges. If He isn’t ruling, things get confused quickly.

And this prepares us for what Isaiah will later describe in chapter 35. Because before God restores the land, He establishes the King. He addresses the issue of authority before He addresses what’s broken. Because renewal begins when His rule is finally acknowledged.

So as we sit with Isaiah 32, the question gently presses in—not with accusation, but with invitation: where has God’s reign been displaced in our lives? Where have we settled for functional faith, you know, faith that works well enough to get by—but never really yields control, verses faithfully surrendering to Him. Because Isaiah’s promise is clear—when God reigns rightly, stability returns. This is where a scattered life begins to be re-centered and re-aligned under God’s rule.

So, Isaiah 32 is showing us what life looks like when God's rule is restored in our lives—things begin to steady. Our lives begin to fall in alignment with Him. But Isaiah doesn't stop there. Because stability is not the end goal. God is not content to simply calm what is chaotic in our lives. Instead, He intends to restore what has been damaged.

So turn with me now to Isaiah chapter 35.

This chapter is not a different promise. It's the continuation of the same one. It's now moving on from things beginning to steady to what God does once He is reigning.

Isaiah begins this chapter by talking about wilderness and dry land. Places that have a really hard time trying to produce life. Places that have been barren for a long time. He says in verse 1,

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus."

Isaiah is describing places where nothing has been growing. Places that have been written off. And he's saying that under God's reign, those places don't stay barren forever.

This isn't about geography, right? You're with me, right? It's about areas of our lives where we've stopped expecting much from. Patterns that feel stuck. Faith that feels dry. Relationships that feel so strained that we worry if they're beyond repair. Or where we feel like our obedience is just mechanical instead of alive.

Isaiah is saying that when God truly reigns in our hearts, He doesn't just bring order to life—He brings life back to places that have been unproductive for a long time. When God truly reigns in our hearts, He begins to work in dried-up areas.

Not overnight. Not magically. But genuinely. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus."

Then in verses 3 and 4, Isaiah shifts from places to people. He says,

"Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who have an anxious heart,
'Be strong; fear not!'"

Notice what Isaiah is not doing here. He's not rebuking weakness. He's naming it. Weak hands. Unsteady knees. Anxious hearts. That's honest. That's what prolonged instability does to people. It wears them down.

This isn't a call to just try harder. Isaiah is describing what God does when He reigns. He restores courage where fear has settled in. He steadies people who have been worn thin.

And goes even further. Look at verses 5 and 6 he says,

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy."

Isaiah is describing the undoing of the damage caused by sin and the Fall. He's giving us a picture of wholeness—of things working the way they were meant to work again.

This does include physical healing. God is able to heal, and at times He does. But Isaiah is not promising that this will be the normal experience of God's people right now. Scripture is clear that faithful, surrendered people still suffer in their bodies. Salvation does not erase mortality.

What Isaiah is describing is the direction of God's reign, not the guarantee of immediate outcomes. Under God's rule, nothing broken is ignored. Nothing damaged is final. Restoration is real—but it is often partial now and complete later.

So this is not a promise that our eyesight will return, or our bodies will be made whole in this life. It is a promise that God's reign ultimately restores what sin has broken, and that no loss, no impairment, and no suffering has the final word.

In the present, that restoration often shows up as steadiness instead of despair, endurance instead of collapse, faith instead of bitterness. And in the end, it will be complete.

Then in verse 8, Isaiah describes something that ties directly back to what we saw in chapter 32. He says,

“And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness.”

Now, this is not about moral perfection. It's about direction. A clear way forward. Not confusion. Not wandering. Not constantly second-guessing every step.

That matters, because confusion is often one of the clearest signs that God's rule has been displaced. And clarity is often one of the first signs that His rule is being restored.

When God reigns, life doesn't become effortless—but it does become oriented. There is a way forward. There is direction instead of drift. When God reigns, life becomes oriented.

And Isaiah closes this chapter by saying that those who walk this way return with joy, not because everything is easy, but because things are finally ordered under the right authority.

So when we talk about restoration, or renewal, or stability, we're not talking about emotional experiences or spiritual highs. We're talking about life coming back into proper alignment under God's rule.

Remember, God is not asking for perfection. He is asking for rightful authority in our lives.

And when His rule is acknowledged—not just believed in, but submitted to—life begins to steady. What has been damaged is addressed. Confusion gives way to clarity. Drift is replaced with direction.

An example of this can be seen in someone like Neeza Powers. He's been sharing his story on social media over the last year. He's shared openly about a long season of confusion about his identity, direction, and self-understanding. But, then He met Jesus. And he began to align His life with Jesus. And so his videos often start out saying, "209 days of being a Christian" and then he shares what he's learned or struggling with. And what's striking about his story is not that everything became easy when he came to Christ—because it didn't. And he's very open and honest about that, it's that he describes finally having a clear way forward. Not wandering. Not constantly second-guessing who he is supposed to be. But he's ordering his life under the authority of Jesus.

This is what Isaiah is getting at. This isn't about moral perfection or instant resolution. It's about direction. Neeza didn't describe Jesus as simply making him feel better. Or leaving him in his sin. He described Jesus as clarifying who is in charge. And when that authority shifted, clarity followed. Confusion didn't disappear overnight, but it no longer ruled. His life became oriented instead of drifting.

That's what Isaiah is describing. When God's rule is restored, people aren't promised an easy path—but they are given a clear one.

This is what Isaiah is holding out for with God's people. And from where we stand, we know this promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus—the King who does not just tell us what's right, but restores us as He reigns.

So at this point, the question becomes very practical: what does it actually look like for Jesus to rule our lives? Not in theory. Not as a statement of belief. But in the ordinary, daily places where decisions are made.

Because when we talk about drift being replaced with direction, drift isn't usually obvious. Most people who are drifting don't feel like they are. Drift doesn't mean you've stopped believing in Jesus. It usually means you've stopped actively yielding to Him.

Drift looks like continuing to pray, but mostly after decisions are already made. It looks like reading Scripture, but not really expecting it to challenge or correct you anymore. It looks like faith still functioning—still attending, still serving—but no longer governing how you respond, decide, or prioritize.

Drift happens when God hasn't been rejected, but He's no longer being consulted. When we rely more on instinct, habit, or urgency than on obedience. Nothing collapses. Nothing explodes. Life keeps moving—but direction slowly blurs.

That's why Isaiah doesn't describe renewal as doing more or trying harder. He describes it as proper rule being restored. In other words, alignment for you and I begins when Jesus has real authority in our lives—not just over what we believe, but over how we live.

So we gotta ask, what does alignment actually look like? It looks like slowing down enough to ask, what does obedience look like in this situation, or moment? before acting. It looks like letting Scripture speak into decisions we'd rather keep personal. For example, how we handle conflict instead of avoiding it or nursing resentment. Scripture presses us

toward forgiveness and honesty, not because it's comfortable, but because it's right.

It looks like responding differently when we're wronged, instead of defaulting to anger or withdrawal, or deflecting.

It looks like naming sin honestly instead of managing appearances.

Alignment doesn't mean instant change. It means clear authority.

And this is important: alignment is not a one-time decision. Drift doesn't happen all at once, and alignment doesn't either. It's practiced. It's renewed. It's returned to. Often quietly.

Sometimes alignment looks like repentance.

Sometimes it looks like surrendering control.

Sometimes it looks like saying, Lord, I've been deciding without You.

And when that happens, life doesn't suddenly become easy—but it does become clearer. We're no longer pulled in ten directions. We're no longer constantly second-guessing. There is direction instead of drift.

This is what Isaiah is holding out to us. Not perfection. Not emotional highs. But a life re-centered under the right authority.

So as we finish, let me bring us back to the question Isaiah has been asking all along: who is ruling?

Not who do we believe in. Not who do we admire. But who actually has authority over the way we live, decide, and respond.

Isaiah shows us that when God reigns, life begins to come back into order. Not because everything is fixed, but because it's finally being governed by the right authority. Stability replaces confusion. Direction replaces drift.

And the invitation this morning is not to clean yourself up or to make a list of changes. It's simply to yield. To acknowledge where Jesus has been crowded out and to let Him rule again.

That may mean repentance. It may mean slowing down. It may mean inviting Scripture back into places you've kept personal. But it begins the same way for all of us—with surrender.

Jesus is not asking for perfection. He is asking for rightful authority. And when He reigns, what has been scattered begins to be re-centered.

Let's pray.