

Isaiah 33 Handout

Last week we studied Isaiah 31-32. Judah was continually warned not to rely on Egypt for help against Assyria, and was urged to trust in the Lord. They were also promised a future righteous King (Messiah) who will bring peace and justice as well as an outpouring of the Spirit which will bring transformation.

Here in chapter 33, we get the sixth and final woe in the series that began back in chapter 28. However, this woe is not addressed to the people of Israel or its leaders. Instead, it is addressing the enemy of Jerusalem (most likely Assyria).

Verse 1

Who does it say this “woe” is to? _____

It goes on to say that when they stop destroying they will be destroyed and when they stop betraying, they will be betrayed.

In the immediate circumstances surrounding Judah at this time, this would seem to be pointing to Assyria. However, this principle or promise has a broader scope. Isaiah often uses historical judgment as a type of pattern. The logic here is universal. We actually see this principle elsewhere in scripture.

Proverbs 11:21 says, *“Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free.”*

Galatians 6:7 says, *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”*

So we see that verse one models God’s consistent justice, not just a one time judgment.

Back in II Kings 16, when Ahaz was king of Judah, he made an original treaty with the king of Assyria (King Sargon II) for protection and help against the kings of Aram and Israel. Ahaz sent a message to the king of Assyria that said, “I am your servant and vassal.” He took silver and gold from the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent them to the king of Assyria. Judah became a vassal state and had to make payments to them.

Becoming a vassal state would have meant they acknowledged Assyria’s supreme authority over Judah as well as political submission. These types of treaties at this time often had a religious component. Vassal states often adopted the religious practices of the dominating nation. Judah was no different in this matter. They adopted at least some elements of the Assyrian religious practices which violated covenant faithfulness to God.

When Ahaz died, Hezekiah became king of Judah. He ended up breaking the treaty that Ahaz had made with Assyria around 705BC at which time Judah stopped paying tribute. This rebellion took place following the death of King Sargon II. Hezekiah saw this as a good time to assert Judah’s independence. This however was what prompted King Sennacherib’s military campaign into Judah around 701BC.

Verses 2-3

The tone shifts to a prayer from God's people.

What do the people ask the Lord to be to them? _____

This shows a sense of humility and dependence. After so many chapters of warning, it seems the people (at least some of them) stop relying on themselves and appeal to God for mercy instead.

It says "*we long for you*" which expresses a heart that is turning back to the Lord.

The second half of verse 2 says, "Be our strength every morning, and our salvation in time of distress."

What does daily dependence on God look like for you?

The "uproar of your army" points to God's power in action. This isn't Judah's army fighting off the enemy and making people flee and the nations scatter. This is God rising up to fight on their behalf.

Verses 4-6

What will the plunder that the enemy took be taken from them like? _____

The wealth of the defeated enemy is now taken from them quickly and completely. The enemy is now stripped of power and resources. We see a total reversal here in this situation – the one who plundered others is now plundered themselves.

What does it say about the Lord at the beginning of verse 5? _____

We see the focus now shifts from the enemy to God Himself. All the attempts by humans to exalt themselves by force or deception will ultimately fail. God alone will be exalted on high.

What will He fill Zion with? _____

We are seeing these two words over and over again.

"He will be a sure foundation" - a foundation is what everything else rests on. "Sure" means firm, stable, reliable. What Isaiah is saying here then is that God Himself is the stable base you can build your life on.

"For your times" - the specific season you are in. For Judah, this was political instability and chaos, threat from Assyria and fear and uncertainty. God is reliable and can be trusting for any and every situation we find ourselves in.

"A rich store of salvation, wisdom and knowledge" - this is the result of building our lives on this foundation.

Salvation → deliverance and rescue

Wisdom → knowing how to live

Knowledge → understanding truth

What does it say is the key to this treasure (vs.6)? _____

In other words, reverence, trust and submission to God. This is the pathway to stability, salvation, wisdom and knowledge (this treasure).

Verses 7-9

These verses paint a picture of hopelessness.

Who does it say is crying aloud and weeping in the streets? _____

We need to understand what was going on at this time. Remember I said that Hezekiah broke the treaty with Assyria. He ends up having a moment of weakness and wavers in his trust in the Lord and seeks to buy off the Assyrians with gold and silver. King Sennacherib accepts Judah's payment, implying that he would stop his invasion and leave Judah alone. That however was not the case. He makes it known that he would soon be coming to Jerusalem to conquer it as well. Hence the feeling of hopelessness the people of Jerusalem are feeling.

Verse 9 depicts what is happening using a drought. This is trying to show that there is no relief in sight. The different places listed there are showing how even the most fertile areas, those that are blessed with rainfall will have none.

Verses 10-12

Who is speaking in verse 10? _____

We get three "nows" and three "I wills" in this verse.

- Now – I will arise
- Now – I will be exalted
- Now – I will be lifted up

The repeated "now" signals a turning point. God has been allowing events to unfold, but *now* He is stepping in decisively. He is about to act in power which will make His authority unmistakable.

Verse 11 shows how everything that the enemy had achieved in plundering the nations and stocking up their storehouses was all for naught – they were filled with chaff and straw that their own breath would light on fire. Assyria had started a fire of oppression, aggression and destruction that swept across the ancient world. Isaiah is saying that one day God is going to turn that fire back on the one who started it.

What is going to happen to the people of Assyria (vs.12)? _____

The imagery used in this verse shows the swift and total defeat. The devastation that God brought on Sennacherib's army in one night will only be a small taste of what is to come with the destruction of the Assyrian empire less than 100 years later.

Verses 13-14

God is still speaking here (continuing from verse 10). He is addressing all people – those who are far away (distant nations) and those who are near (Judah/Jerusalem).

What does He want the people far away to hear? _____

What does He want those near to do? _____

The report of God's awesome power will reach the ends of the earth. This becomes a global testimony. God's actions demand recognition. What just happened is not some random act. It is God's doing. This refers to both God defeating Assyria as well as His protection of Jerusalem. This is a call to all people (near and far) to recognize God's power by paying attention to what He has done and responding in reverence.

What does verse 14 say about the sinners in Zion? _____

Zion refers to Jerusalem. The "sinners" would have been people within Judah who were living in rebellion against God.

The question becomes, why are they afraid? We saw in verse 10 that God is rising in power and the enemy has been judged. Such a vision of God's holy power causes the people to tremble in terror. Perhaps they realize they have no more right to stand before such a holy God than the Assyrians do.

Two rhetorical questions are asked:

- Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?
- Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?

These questions aren't asking for information, but rather they are expressing fear and realization. The people are basically saying, "No one can survive this!" - "We cannot stand before a holy God!"

Listen to what it says in a commentary on Isaiah by Andrew M. Davis about this: *"In December, 1740 Jonathan Edwards preached a powerful sermon based on Isaiah 33:14 entitled 'Sinners in Zion Tenderly Warned'. In it he asked the question of that verse: 'Who among us can dwell with a consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with ever-burning flames?' The 'consuming fire' is the holiness of God, and we sinners are like combustible chaff. The surface of the sun is said to be more than 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and the closest a NASA probe could be able to get to it is four million miles away. At that staggering distance, the temperature is an astonishing 2,600 degrees Fahrenheit. Just as the sun exists in unapproachable heat, so God dwells in unapproachable light (I Timothy 6:16). God's holiness is like the raging inferno of the sun, and none of us sinners can survive it. The prophetic Word calls all the people of Zion to look inward, see the corruption of our sins, and flee to Christ."*

(Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Isaiah by Andrew M. Davis)

Verses 15-16

These two verses give us the answer to the questions at the end of verse 14. It is those who:

- Walk righteously - they live with integrity, not just outward religion
- Speak what is right - they have honest, truthful speech
- Reject gain from extortion - refuse corruption or exploitation
- Don't accept bribes - won't be bought
- Stop their ears against plots of murder - they refuse to participate in evil
- Shut their eyes against contemplating evil - they avoid even entertaining wrongdoing.

In the Message, these two verses read like this:

“The answer’s simple:

*Live right,
speak the truth,
despise exploitation,
refuse bribes,
reject violence,
avoid evil amusements.*

This is how you raise your standard of living!

*A safe and stable way to live.
A nourishing, satisfying way to live.”*

Isaiah is giving us a clear picture of the mark of being a member of God’s kingdom: to behave as the King does. This is a picture of whole life integrity — it includes heart, speech, mind and actions that are aligned with God.

When you look at the list in these two verses, what part do you think is the hardest or most challenging?

Verse 16 gives the promises for that person. What will they do? _____

We see that those who live what we read in verse 15 are promised security, protection and provision. God Himself becomes their safety and sustainer.

Isaiah isn’t saying that we need to be perfect. What he’s showing is that when you truly belong to the Lord, you will reflect His character in your life.

The rest of the chapter (vs.17-24) is picturing what it will be like in the final perfect kingdom of Christ. There are several promises listed in these verses.

Verses 17-19

What is the first thing they will see? _____

Verse 18 says they will think about the former terror; they are reflecting on the past fear of oppression. The three titles mentioned likely refer to Assyrian officials:

- Chief officer - military authority
- “One who took the revenue” - tax collector/tribute enforcer
- “Officer in charge of the towers” - one who inspected defenses during a siege.

The people are asking “where are they now?”, and the answer is that they are gone (“you will see those arrogant people no more”). So, we see that fear and oppression will be gone and only remembered in the past. God replaces it with peace, beauty and security.

Verses 20-21

What will their eyes see? _____

We get a list of what this will be like:

- A peaceful abode
- A tent that will not be moved
 - its stakes will never be pulled up
 - Its ropes will never be broken

We see here that what was temporary and fragile will become permanently secure because of God's presence.

What does it say the Lord will be for them there? _____

"A place of broad rivers and streams" - this is interesting imagery because unlike other cities, Jerusalem didn't have major rivers. This would lead us to believe that this is referring to something symbolic and supernatural. Rivers in the ancient world represented life, provision, protection (it was a natural defense barrier) and prosperity.

Then it says that "*no galley with oars will ride them, no mighty ship will sail them*" - this suggests that these "rivers" are not for enemies to travel on. They are completely for blessing and protection. God would be their strength and provision, and no ships will be able to threaten them. In other words, God would be their life source, their security and defense. Zion will get everything she needs directly from God.

The contrast being made here is:

Without God

Vulnerable city
No natural defense
Fear of enemies
Scarcity

With God

Unshakeable dwelling
God Himself as defense
Untouchable peace
Abundance

As we saw earlier in this chapter, the people feared destruction (vs.14). Assyria was threatening everything. Now though, Zion is untouched, God is present and security is firm. The answer to their fear wasn't stronger walls; it was God Himself dwelling with His people.

Verses 22-24

What does verse 22 say that the Lord is? _____

- _____
 - He is the one who decides what is right and wrong, punishes sin, and ensures justice.
 - Human judges fail because they are biased, corrupt or limited. God's judgment is perfect, impartial and inevitable.
 - Trusting God as judge means living a life of honesty, integrity and accountability, knowing that He sees all things.

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 - God sets the standard for life. He defines what is just, right and holy.
 - Without God as lawgiver, societies rely on shifting human laws or opinions. God's law is stable, eternal and rooted in His character.
 - Following God's laws leads to life and security. It emphasizes submission and reverence (fear of the Lord is the key here)

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 - God reigns over His people and the nations, exercising authority and protection.
 - God's kingship ensures stability, security and peace, unlike human kings who can fail.
 - Trusting God as King shifts our focus from worldly power to God centered security, making Him the ultimate leader of our lives.

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 - God acts to rescue His people, deliver them from danger, sin and oppression.
 - Human power can't save us from ultimate threats. Only God can redeem and protect.
 - Salvation is both physical and spiritual. God preserves, forgives and restores.

Notice how each of these roles is distinct, but that together they show God's comprehensive governance:

Judge → enforces justice

Lawgiver → sets the standard

King → rules and protects

Savior → acts to rescue

This contrasts greatly with Judah's leaders:

- Can't judge righteously
- Can't set eternal standards
- Can't rule perfectly
- Can't truly save

Isaiah emphasizes that it is God alone who fulfills all of these roles, unlike human leaders. In human systems these roles are divided, but here we see complete leadership. God encompasses all of them. In Isaiah 28-31 we saw Judah's failed leadership with corrupt rulers, broken systems and misplaced trust. Now we see how God governs His people perfectly, and the result is that **He** will save His people – not Egypt, not armies, not strategy – God alone will save.

Which of these roles do you find most meaningful? Which do you find the most difficult to remember?

We get the imagery of a ship in verse 23. **What kind of shape is it in?** _____

The ropes are slack, the mast is unstable and the sail is hanging useless. This is seen as a description of Assyria's downfall. They are being looked at as a disabled ship – unable to function and completely defeated.

What does it say about the plunder at the end of verse 23? _____

This shows us that even the weakest will participate in the victory. No strength is required to benefit from it. It is God who will win the battle, but His people will share in the reward.

What does verse 24 say that no one living in Zion will say? _____

This points to no lingering effects of suffering; there is wholeness.

What does it say about the sins of those who dwell there? _____

All of this points to a fully restored community where God rules completely, enemies are powerless, weakness is no barrier, sin is forgiven and sickness is gone.

These verses are the resolution of everything that came before.

True security comes when we are living under God's rule with sin removed and wholeness restored.

Let's look at these promises in verses 17-24 a little closer.

- ❖ Vision of a King (vs.17)
 - This is a direct experience of God's glory and beauty
 - This is not just about survival, but about vision and delight in God
- ❖ Freedom from fear (vs.18)
 - Past fears will be remembered but will not be relived
 - Anxiety won't dominate anymore because fear will lose its grip
- ❖ Lasting peace and stability (vs.18-19)
 - Enemies and threats will be removed
 - There will be no more intimidation or oppression
 - This is complete deliverance from what once threatened
- ❖ God's protection (vs.20-21)
 - There will be peace and permanence
 - This is a place that cannot be shaken or removed
 - This is lasting security, not temporary relief
- ❖ God's perfect rule (vs.22)
 - God perfectly governs, leads and rescues
 - There is no need for human systems to fill the gap
 - This is complete leadership and salvation in God
- ❖ Victory over enemies (vs.23)
 - Even the weak will share in the victory
 - Success doesn't depend on human strength
 - God's power overcomes human limitation
- ❖ Healing and forgiveness (vs.24)
 - Promise of physical healing and spiritual forgiveness
 - This is total restoration - body and soul

Which promise stands out to you most and why?

It can be hard for those of us who live in democratic countries to understand and relate to this emphasis on a king, since we have a long history of government by the people. It doesn't take much disorder however, for us to start clamoring for strong leaders. When the breakdown of society and government begin to happen, we want a strong leader to take charge. That is exactly what Isaiah is promising the people. God is going to give them a leader who is strong, righteous, just and compassionate. That same promise extends to us as well.

A major theme in today's chapter is that God is the sure foundation. We already saw that a foundation is what everything else rests on, and that "sure" means firm, stable, reliable and unshakeable.

What makes God uniquely stable?

- ❖ He is unchanging → He doesn't shift with circumstances
- ❖ He is all-powerful → Nothing can override Him
- ❖ He is faithful → He keeps His word; His promises are true
- ❖ He is present → He is not distant, but active in our lives

This is all great news, but what does it practically mean to live like God is our "sure foundation"?

- Turning to Him first in uncertainty
- Letting His truth guide decisions
- Trusting His control when life feels unstable
- Not anchoring your security in circumstances

How this plays out in our daily lives:

When anxiety hits: Foundation = God is in control

When decisions are hard: Foundation = God's wisdom guides me

When life feels unstable: Foundation = God hasn't moved, even if everything else has.

What would it look like for me this week to actually live like God is my foundation?

This week, when you feel anxious or uncertain, pause and remind yourself: *God is my foundation.*