

Isaiah 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 33 Ah, you destroyer, who yourself have not been destroyed, you traitor whom none has betrayed. When you have ceased to destroy, you will be destroyed, and when you have finished betraying, they will betray you.

O Lord, be gracious to us, we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble. At the tumultuous noise peoples flee. When you lift yourself up, nations are scattered, and your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers, as locusts leap, it is leapt upon.

The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high. He will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge.

The fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure. Behold, their heroes cry in the streets, the envoys of peace weep bitterly, the highways lie waste, the traveller ceases, covenants are broken, cities are despised, there is no regard for man.

The land mourns and languishes. Lebanon is confounded and withers away. Sharon is like a desert, and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves. Now I will arise, says the Lord.

[1 : 13] Now I will lift myself up. Now I will be exalted. You conceive chaff. You give birth to stubble. Your breath is a fire that will consume you, and the peoples will be as if burned to lime, like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire.

Hear, you who are far off, what I have done, and you who are near, acknowledge my might. The sinners in Zion are afraid. Trembling has seized the godless.

Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings? He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, who despises the gain of oppressions, who shakes his hands lest they hold a bribe, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from looking on evil.

He will dwell on the heights. His place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks. His bread will be given him. His water will be sure. Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty.

They will see a land that stretches afar. Your heart will muse on the terror. Where is he who counted? Where is he who weighed the tribute? Where is he who counted the towers?

[2 : 23] You will see no more the insolent people, the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend, stammering in a tongue that you cannot understand. Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts.

Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken. But there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass.

For the Lord is our judge. The Lord is our lawgiver. The Lord is our king. He will save us. Your cords hang loose. They cannot hold the mast firm in its place, or keep the sails spread out.

Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided. Even the lame will take the prey, and no inhabitant will say, I am sick. The people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.

Continuing to address Judah in the period prior to 701 BC, Isaiah speaks a word of hope into their increasingly dire situation. Gary Smith suggests that the context of this chapter might be the Assyrians breaking an agreement that was made when King Hezekiah paid tribute to them, something described in 2 Kings chapter 18 verses 14 to 16.

[3 : 40] And Hezekiah king of Judah sent the king of Assyria, Lachish, saying, I have done wrong. Withdraw from me. Whatever you impose on me, I will bear. And the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold.

And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord

and from the doorpost that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria. Reneging on this earlier treaty, Sennacherib apparently decided that he would settle for nothing less than Judah's unconditional surrender, and so he came up against Jerusalem. Naturally, the people of Judah were desperate and despairing.

All hope of deliverance or escape seemed lost. It is not certain that this is the context of chapter 33, although it seems to be the most plausible possibility. Judah's plight is grim, and yet the Lord declares that He will reverse it.

defeating the Assyrians and granting them security. Smith suggests that the prophecy might have been delivered in response to Hezekiah leading the people in repentance and in seeking the Lord's face in their crisis.

[4 : 52] The words of Isaiah take the form of a woe oracle, which we should probably see as ironic in character. Assyria, which given the wider context of these prophecies, is almost certainly the object of this oracle, is characterized as a destroyer and a traitor.

Assyria's brutality and destructive power was well known in the ancient world. It was a cruel empire that maintained its rule in large measure through terrorizing its enemies, through mass executions, torture, and making public spectacles of all who would oppose them.

Over a century earlier, for instance, Assyrian kings described flaying rebels and covering city walls with their skins. There are Assyrian reliefs from a palace in Nineveh in the British Museum, which depict Assyrians forcing defeated nobles to grind the exhumed bodies of their ancestors.

Those cities that did not immediately surrender to them could expect mass slaughter, cruel and creative tortures, and the most gruesome public spectacles. Assyria was also treacherous, quite prepared not to honor agreements when they considered them inconvenient, as we see in the case of Sennacherib's attack upon Jerusalem, even after Hezekiah's sending of tribute.

Assyria would itself face the sort of treatment with which it had treated others, being destroyed and betrayed. Those who lived by the sword and by treachery would die by the sword and by treachery.

[6 : 13] Perhaps just when they thought that they were secure, when they had put their predation on other nations to one side and were enjoying their ill-gotten gains, they would suffer the same fate that they had inflicted upon others.

Judah, however, perhaps in part because all other recourse and support was stripped from them, would turn to the Lord for his help. Hezekiah's prayer to the Lord in this moment of crisis is recorded for us in chapter 37, verses 16 to 20.

O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear. Open your eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire.

For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.

[7 : 19] While the people's turning to the Lord would be far from perfect, occurring only after other options had failed them, deliverance and restoration would follow from it. Verses 2 to 6 describe the coming of God as the warrior king against the foes of his distressed people, acting on behalf of the oppressed, bringing low and scattering the mighty, and spoiling their goods.

The ultimate throne is not that of brutal empires like Assyria, but the Lord, who is enthroned in the heavens, above all proud earthly powers. It is in the Lord that the hope of Zion is to be found, not in Egypt, not in shrewd foreign policy, not in treaties with treacherous and cruel powers.

All of the goods that Jerusalem so desperately longs for in its time of crisis, stability, deliverance, guidance, counsel and insight, are found in the Lord and will be enjoyed by those who look to him within it.

To a nation that lives by sight, it's difficult to recognize, but the true strength and treasure of Zion is not found in vast armies of horses and chariots, in powerful international allies, mighty fortifications and walls, and vast treasure houses full of gold and silver, but in the Lord himself, being enjoyed by all who fear and trust him.

Verses 7 to 9 describe the devastated people, perhaps when they heard the news that Sennacherib was coming up against Jerusalem, even after they thought that their sending of tribute would appease him.

[8 : 43] All are abject, struck with the most terrible despair and foreboding, every glimmer of hope extinguished. With their sense of abandonment and hopelessness, normal life and commerce ceases.

Trust has been betrayed. The word translated cities in the ESV of verse 8 might be better understood as a reference to witnesses, a parallel to the breaking of covenants.

The most fruitful regions of the land are now barren. The Lord's voice, however, breaks through the darkness of the nation's plight. At the moment of the people's greatest despair, he would act and prove his sovereignty.

With a threefold now, the Lord heralds the reversal of the situation that he would accomplish. The treacherous destroyer fancies himself immune in his power, conceiving his works to be immune to judgment.

Yet they are like chaff and stubble, like refuse to be burned. Indeed, it would be the destroyer's own fiery breath that would ignite the fire in which it would be burned. All the peoples would be destroyed by the fire like thorns.

[9 : 44] Those peoples might be the other nations around Judah in whom they have been tempted to put their trust, along with Assyria itself. The Lord would, as we see in many other parts of scripture, reveal his mighty arm before the nations.

When this occurred, it would not only be seen by nations far off, but also by peoples nearer to home, within Judah and in Jerusalem itself. Chapter 31 verse 9 described the Lord as the one whose fire is in Zion and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

As the power and justice of the Lord was displayed, sinners in Jerusalem would suddenly realize the seriousness of being in a city in the midst of which the living God dwelt. Earlier, in response to the theophany at the time of his commission in chapter 6, Isaiah had cried out in despair at his realization of his own uncleanness before the thrice holy Lord.

Now the sinners in Zion would have a similar experience as the true might and holiness of the Lord dawned upon them. Who can live in the presence of such a God? As John Oswald observes, the response of the prophet to the sinner's question, who among us can dwell with the consuming fire, recalls the language of passages such as Psalm 24 verses 3 to 5.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully, he will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

[11 : 15] Integrity of heart and action, fleeing from evil and injustice, and commitment to the path of righteousness is that which marks out those who will dwell in the presence of the Lord and enjoy his blessings.

The Lord will provide for and protect the righteous, but the wicked will be judged. What will the consequences of the Lord's action on behalf of his people be? Verses 17 to 24 describe them. The image here, as Oswald argues, likely combines elements of an eschatological and a historical vision. The king in view in verse 17, he maintains, is almost certainly the Lord himself, the true king of Israel.

This would seem to be supported, he argues, by verse 22 of the chapter. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king, he will save us.

Brother Charles adopts a different line of interpretation, suggesting that we read the reference to the king in relation to the description of the righteous king in chapter 32, which in verse 1 read, Behold, a king will reign in righteousness and princes will rule in justice.

[12 : 19] However, he refrains from identifying the king with Hezekiah in particular. Such an identification, he argues, would be an unwarranted historicization of the text. The text is rather a more general declaration of the hope of Israel.

The expression, a king in his beauty, is a description of the righteous king's glory, splendor and majesty, who will rule over an expansive realm, which King Hezekiah most definitely did not. Charles is certainly correct in his resistance to pitting messianic readings of such texts against readings that focus on the Lord's sovereignty. Within the theology of Isaiah, there is no breach between these things.

The sovereignty of the Lord will be displayed through the deliverance wrought by his anointed one. Perhaps we should read this as a depiction of the ideal king, as the typological reality of which the smallest glimpse is seen, in figures like Hezekiah.

