

Notes on Isaiah 33-35

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This section of Isaiah is similar to 29:15-24 and stresses that God not only has a plan in mind, but that he acts on it in history. This section often places together what God did in Isaiah's day and what he will do at the end of history. Thus the downfall of Assyria is related (not in time but in similarity) to the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom of Christ. We need to remember that God's past acts are parallel to his future acts; the same Lord is at work. 33:1 has the last of 6 'woes'. Woes 1-3 focus on history and 4-6 include more of the ultimate future. Betrayers (33:1,8) cannot frustrate God's will (33:3,10). His kingdom will come (33:13-24). The enemy will finally be defeated (chapter 34), and God's people will make their pilgrimage back to Zion (chapter 35).

33:1 The destroyer is Assyria, a nation that tricked Jerusalem into paying a large price to be spared. Hezekiah took gold and silver from the Lord's Temple and gave it to the Assyrians (2Kings 18). This was shameful and it did not work, because Assyria broke covenant (33:8) and attacked Jerusalem anyway. God pronounces that the betrayer Assyria will be betrayed. The world is characterized by deceit.

33:2-4 Judah's habit was to trust deceivers. Now we have the language of repentance. Now they cry to the Lord to save them. They should have prayed this way from the beginning instead of running to Egypt for help. The world looks for pragmatic solutions; the people of God look to God's promises. "We long for you" shows a great change of heart. Now they trust in the Lord who speaks/rises up to deliver his own. The verbs 'scattered' and 'flee' are past tense; the looting takes over when no opposition is able to stop it. This is written as if it has already happened. In prophecy a prediction of the future is so certain it may be spoken of as a past event. The destroyer Assyria (v.1) is spoken of as destroyed.

33:5,6 Now God's people are no longer blind; they see clearly that God is the exalted Lord. Both things come together: the defeat of the wicked and the salvation the Lord gives. He is determined to fill Zion with justice and righteousness. Statements like that show an eschatological flavor. After Hezekiah, the reign of Manasseh was a very evil time. God spared Jerusalem from Assyria in Hezekiah's day, but he will fill Zion with righteousness in the day of Christ. "Your times" are new and better days, the opposite of their times of distress. When eventually Zion is filled with justice, the Lord himself Who cannot sin will be their sure foundation. (Our place is as secure as the conduct of Jesus is righteous.) Since 'this' treasure is masculine, it should read 'His' treasure. Thus all God's resources will benefit his people, which is salvation complete. "*Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed*" (Romans 13:11); it is not yet finished. God's storehouse of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge is Christ (Colossians 2:2,3; 1Corinthians 1:30). The fear of the Lord is a gift God uses to bless us.

33:7-12 This chapter is focused on Assyria's immediate betrayal since the betrayal by Egypt is already a fact. (See the note on 33:1 above). Vv.7-12 are God's Judgment on the people, not an external enemy but sinners in Zion (v.14).

33:7-9 The immediate crisis. The brave men of Jerusalem and the envoys negotiating with the Assyrians face the Assyrian demand for surrender (Isaiah 36). They are distressed. The danger is so great no one is traveling on the roads. The Assyrians have come to conquer. The agreement is broken; life and truth are not respected. The situation is pictured as if the cedars of Lebanon were dying. Fertile places with more rain like Carmel and Bashan face drought, and Sharon on the coast is like the Arabah, a desert. The dire situation is of nature in decay; man's sin brought God's curse on the earth (Genesis 3:17-19).

33:10-12 In man's terrible plight, God loves to show his glory. Three times we read 'now'. 'Now' is a word of time, the decay precedes the 'now' of God's intervention. When the wrong counsel of their wise men is shown to be worthless – mere chaff and straw – there is a 'now is the time' for God in his exalted role. For God to be truly high, man must be brought low (2:9-11). In their supposed wisdom they left God out of their thinking (29:1; 30:1,2; 31:1).

They brought on themselves consuming fire. Isaiah is very clear that God does not save people by avoiding condemnation and the active wrath of God on our sin. The consuming fire is never an option for either sinners in their sins or those being saved from sin. The consuming fire is a necessity, a necessity for God to be God. The cross of Christ is not merely an illustration of self-giving love; it was Christ enduring from the Father all that our sins deserved. Then when the consuming fire has done its holy work, the benefits of God's kindness to us may flow unimpeded.

33:13-16 Who can live in the Presence of the Lord? Vv. 13-24 are a proclamation, "Hear!" This is followed by a second proclamation, "Listen; pay attention" (34:1-17). The first says more of the salvation of Zion; the second is entirely judgment on the nations.

33:13 The Book of Isaiah opens with a call to heaven and earth to hear God's complaint about his rebellious people (1:2-4). Here in v.13 all who are far and near must hear. (When Isaiah refers to extremities, such as "near & far", it is a literary device to indicate people everywhere). The Lord has something to say! Beginning an announcement this way indicates its importance. The Lord Jesus sometimes used "truly, truly" to begin a very important statement (John 5:24). What is this very important message in vv.13-16? It is a word to sinners that God will not allow sin in his presence. Sinners should heed this; if they do not, they will be terrified.

33:14 I think the question, "Who of us can dwell in the consuming fire?" must be answered, "None of us, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But the Bible teaches that there is forgiveness and that God does produce righteousness in his people. He gives righteousness as a gift (Romans 5:17 to secure our status, and he also produces holy living in us. Here in vv.13-16 the text speaks of the holiness that must be in the life of everyone in God's presence. "*Without holiness no one will see the Lord*" (Hebrews 12:14). The godless are "sinners in Zion"; though they are covenant people they are still godless. They are covenant people in his holy city who are hypocrites. Their confidence that they may reside with God in his city is a false confidence.

They are unaware of God's purity and hatred of sin, a holiness which responds to sin as a consuming fire. Those who live in sin are not his true people (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 5:5-7) and will be consumed, (Revelation 21:7,8). Isaiah 33 is meant to sober everyone, because we all have sins. It should make us take confession of sin and repentance very seriously. It should also make us keenly aware that it is Christ we need, and in the gospel, Christ that we have. He died for the sins of his people; he gives the Holy Spirit who produces righteousness in us. At his coming that transformation will be complete, so that in the New Jerusalem we will be without sin. Then God, the consuming fire, will walk with all his redeemed children without consuming them. In later verses, the Lord is the one who saves (v.22) and forgives (v.24), so it is clear that "he who walks righteously" is a sinner who has been forgiven. The Lord Jesus is the only man in heaven who can be in the presence of God in his own righteousness.

Remember, if God should mark our sins and charge us for them, none of us could stand, (Psalm 130:3). Thank the Lord, with him there is forgiveness (Psalm 130:4, Micah 7:18) and purification from all our sin (1 John 1:9). Salvation includes justification in which we are forgiven, and sanctification in which we are

made holy. The two are never separated; if one is absent, so is the other, for God heals the waywardness of his justified people (Hosea 14:4).

One terrible error some make in reading a text like Isaiah 33:13-16 is that they see clearly that the justified are holy. From this they make a false conclusion, they think people are justified by being holy. This is the old error of telling people that a person becomes a Christian by being one. The Bible teaches that justified persons are saints and become saints, so they suppose that people are justified because they are saints. That confuses cause and result. We are justified only because of the obedience of Christ for us; this new status results in God declaring us righteous and giving us the Spirit who makes us obey.

33:15,16 So we are warned in vv. 13-16 that how we walk and speak, how we treat others concerning money, whether we will pervert justice for a bribe, whether we will respect the life of our neighbor, and whether we plan evil – all these reveal whether we are true covenant people or sinners who live in Zion, who will be consumed in the holy fire of God. The man who shuns his sin will dwell safely on high with the Lord, enjoying the Lord's care and provision forever. A text like this must be read in the light of Revelation 21,22.

The Lord among His People 33:17-24

33:17 The preceding verse places the righteous man “on the heights” with the Lord; now the dwelling of God is with men (Revelation 21:3). Like Job, in our flesh we shall see God (Job 19:25-27). We know from v.22 the king of v.17 is the Lord himself. The spacious land not divided or restricted (the way the land of Israel is today) will stretch into the distant horizon (v.1).

33:18,19 When that day comes, people will reflect on what it was once like. They will remember foreigners who occupied their land; now they are gone! No longer will the sounds of an alien language be among them, as in 28:11-13. They are free from oppressors.

33:20 The festivals represent their religious life; the Lord will be worshipped. Jerusalem will have peace and will be settled in one place. The days of pilgrimage are over; no more pulling up the tent and moving on; they are home at last.

33:21-23 These verses combine the Lord's presence with the mention of ships. I think it is a picture of God's might protecting them from a foreign warship. The land is safe (v.1); now Isaiah adds that no enemy will approach by sea and go upstream to attack. The enemy vessel lies dead in the water, destroyed, and its goods the possession of all God's people. (Even the slow ones, the lame, go home with plunder.) The Lord is Mighty, the Judge who delivers and the Lawgiver who directs into his will. In that day, his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

33:24 Sin afflicts us physically and in our relationship with God. The future experience is that all will be well in body, and all sins are removed.

Isaiah 34: The Final Judgment

A note on hermeneutics The prophets often spoke in expressions familiar to their day. In 33:20 it used festivals for worship. The Bible is not teaching that those festivals will be instituted again, but that worship will continue. Likewise, 33:21-23 spoke of sailing ships with oars, unlike our ocean ships today. The Bible is not teaching a return to that kind of ship, nor even

that in Israel they will look at a broad river. The pictures are in a form familiar to the people of Isaiah's day to show a transformed reality of peace and worship.

Isaiah 34 does a similar thing. It repeatedly (vv. 5, 6, 9, & 11) uses Edom (or Bozrah, its capital city) as the object of God's judgment. There are good reasons to do so. It does not mean that Isaiah is speaking of Edom as a nation in the future. Long ago Edom disappeared from the earth. How do we understand this way of writing? An example: Suppose a preacher is speaking of some enemy of the Lord who is very strong and intimidating. The preacher might say, "God will bring this Goliath down!" He does not mean that he is speaking of the Goliath of David's day. He uses 'Goliath' because that name is typical of other foes in other times. There was a real Goliath, but there are others after him who are like him, and so his name may be used of them. This is common in our speech. In Isaiah 34, Edom, like Babylon in some other Scriptures, is symbolic of hostile power defiant of God.

Some background on Edom God chose Jacob to be his and passed over Esau leaving him in his sin, "*Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated*" (Malachi 1:2-5). Esau is the father of the nation Edom, just as Jacob is the father of the people of Israel. Amos 1:11,12 shows that Edom's anger against Israel was continual. In Numbers 20:14-21, they would not let their brothers pass through their land but attacked them. In the Book of Obadiah, when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, Edomites entered Jerusalem to seize their wealth and kill those trying to escape. Their unending hostility was notorious, even mentioned in the psalms Israel sang (Psalms 60, 83, & 137). The historical books tell of wars with Edom lasting for centuries (1 Samuel 14:47; 1 Kings 11:14-25; 2 Kings 8:20; 14:7). The Lord chose to use Edom in a proverbial sense, as a figure to represent all nations opposed to him and his people. When Isaiah 34 speaks of Edom or Bozrah, it is actually speaking of all nations in the future Day of the Lord (34:2). Later in Isaiah 63, when Isaiah spoke of Christ's vengeance on the nations, the winepress of his wrath was located in Bozrah.

34:1-17 This second announcement is of judgment; all nations must pay attention. There is not one word of divine appeal and not one word of mercy in it. When final judgment finally comes, there will be no opportunity for repentance. If they call, God will not answer (Proverbs 1:28-33). The mercy of God is that he tells us all this in advance. So v.1 calls on the nations to listen. Why should they listen? Four reasons are given:

1) The Lord has indignation, 34:2-4 Strong words are used for the heat of wrath and anger. The wrath of God is always on those who do not believe (John 3:36). Often God in patience restrains his wrath, but this wrath will be released in acts of judgment, when sinners get what they deserve. When God's wrath is released, there is a pile of bodies, those he will kill in his anger. This text includes the smells and sights. It is so drastic it is like the entire universe caving in with stars falling from their place (an example of apocalyptic language).

2) The Lord's sword is active 34:5,6 God's sword is not mounted on a wall unused. It is full as if it could drink blood, and bathed as if covered with blood. Edom is spoken of for reasons given above. Its destruction is total (v.5) with no survivors (Obadiah 18).

3) The Lord has a sacrifice 34:6,7 This is one of the saddest things in the Bible to read. So often the sacrifice of animals is given to teach the grace of God in providing a substitute who would be sacrificed for us. Christ is the sacrifice who has suffered the wrath of God for his people (1 Corinthians 5:7; Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 9:26 and Hebrews 10). But that sacrifice may be rejected, as Hebrews 10:26 warns,

"If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

In Isaiah 34 the Lord has a sacrifice different from all the sacrifices in his Temple. No longer is there a sacrifice in the place of sinners; this one is the sacrifice of sinners themselves.

4) The Lord has a day of vengeance 34:8 This great slaughter is a day of vengeance (v.8) and retribution. In Isaiah 34 there is a memory of Edom's past sins against Zion. It is God's role to avenge and he will do so (Romans 12:19). The books will be opened and the dead will be judged according to what they have done (Revelation 20:11-15). Either way, the justice of God is satisfied; it will be through the sacrifice of the Savior or the sacrifice of those who have no Savior. God cannot violate his justice. Never has God given any sinner more than he deserves, nor will he give less.

34:10 This part ends with the words "generation to generation". The land of Edom is pictured as on fire, God's frequent metaphor for the ultimate judgment. Even its streams of water are burning pitch. As in the end of Babylon in Revelation 19:3, the smoke rises forever. God has emphasized finality; there is no new day, no recovery, no hope. When God is done with them, their destruction is permanent.

34:10-17 It is desolate because no man will be part of Edom again. Weeds and animals overtake the land. They are the ones that will not be disturbed by people again in Edom. Her nobles and princes are gone (v.12). The words *chaos* and *desolation* in v.11 are the same Hebrew words translated *formless* and *empty* in Genesis 1:2. For the redeemed, God makes everything new (Revelation 21:5). For sinners who end life still in their sin, God makes their world like the chaos prior to the original creation. So for Edom, the animals move in and make their home in the homes of those who can never return. God has so ordered and will make it happen by his Spirit. The way an inheritance is given out, with this item assigned to one person and that to another, the animals and birds will receive as their inheritance what once belonged to Edom, and that is how it will be forever. In hell, when people have thoughts of their homes, there is this sober Scripture (committed to writing on a scroll, v.6) to tell them all has been given to the birds; it will remain that way forever from generation to generation. (See v.10.)

Isaiah 35

This chapter is one of the highlights of all of Isaiah. It is the homecoming; their pilgrimage is over. Sin is gone; all who make any claim of being the Lord's are holy. No more hypocrites. This is the Old Testament speaking of the New Jerusalem, a place that is clean. Neither sin nor sinners enter. The new world is presented as one of lush vegetation in the environment, and a life of joy, gladness, and song in the heart. Because this is the true promise of God, we are to know it and believe it and thereby be encouraged. Isaiah has not yet written of the atoning work of the Messiah to come. Here he shows the results of our Lord's atonement and uses two strong atonement words to speak of those who enter Zion. He says they are redeemed and ransomed.

35:1,2 Under the judgment of God, the dust of Edom will turn to burning sulfur (34:9). Now we read of the opposite. Parched land will be glad; it will shout for joy. In this chapter, the results are told before the cause. The physical creation is changed to new life, but there is more; it has other qualities; it is joyful. In this way the outer is symbolic of a great inner transformation. Yet with all this glory from God all around them, they see the glory of God. The joy of the future is not merely improved surroundings, but communion with God and a true knowledge of him in every heart. "*They will see the glory of God...*" The text does not yet say who the "they" are.

35:3,4 Here is a call to be encouraged. We are responsible for our own encouragement by heeding the things God has said to promote it. This chapter just gave a picture of a renewed earth as an expression of God's glory, plus the assurance that we shall see the glory of God and his majesty. This is a promise of more than what God allowed when Moses asked to see God's glory (Exodus 33:18). In the light of what God will do, we are called upon to strengthen feeble hands. (See Hebrews 12:12.) Discouragement is related to a refusal to keep in mind God's promises. Encouragement is related to obeying the Lord who

directs our minds into his ways and his purpose. Faith believes that what he says, he will do. Faith looks to the city Isaiah 35 reveals. Faith gives hope for the future, and sees in the distance what God has promised (Hebrews 11:10,13,14). Faith obeys the command to look to the Lord. V.4 says, “Behold your God” and pays attention to what he will do. (See 40:9.) God will set things right in relation to our adversaries, and in relation to his own people, bring about a completed salvation. We cannot ask for more.

35:5,6 Then – we must be patient till the then comes – THEN will all our weaknesses be removed. Eyes and ears are receptive organs; legs and tongues are tools needed for activity. Incapacity will be gone, enabling greater enjoyment of the Lord, as in v.2. Joy (v.6) is already a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23), but God has not yet given the Spirit to all in the fullness of his power. (To this, Christ was the exception, John 3:31-35). God presently makes love, joy and other fruit of the Spirit increase; in the Day of the Lord it will be complete (1Thessalonians 3:12,13) with no more sorrow, (v.10).

35:6,7 Why will this happen? The reason is that water will gush in the desert. Water is mentioned in four ways. The message is that new life – always from the Holy Spirit – is being generated in nature again. In vv.5,6 this new life affects people. The change is the opposite of desolation, the opposite of the judgment of God in Isaiah 34. In this new setting, there is a Highway. It will “be there”. It is the Way of Holiness, but who will travel this road? Before he tells, Isaiah says who will not be there: no unclean, no fools. (In Proverbs fools are those who reject the word and wisdom of the Lord.)

God says we have sin; if we say we have no sin, we make God a liar (1 John 1:8-10). If the unclean cannot enter, who then can be on this road? Justification is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us – not ours improved, but his perfect righteousness given. Then in addition, the Spirit’s transforming work will be complete and all those in Christ will qualify, because God has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:12,13). In Christ we are declared clean (righteous) when we believe. Christ is our righteousness, but he is also our sanctification, (1 Corinthians 1:30), so his saints without exception are those who have begun to walk in the way of holiness.

35:9,10 There and then, there will be safety; no lion can attack. In this life, danger is with us (1 Peter 5:8). In vv.9,10 the text is explicit on who will make it safely all the way to Zion: “The redeemed will walk there.” Then they are called the ransomed. Both words indicate that the payment of a price has been made. ‘Redeemed’ means a payment has been made to acquire. ‘Ransomed’ is more that a payment has been made to liberate. It is our Lord Jesus Christ Who has redeemed us with his blood (Ephesians 1:7). It is he who came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In the OT a man who took on the place and duty of a dead relative, or a relative in poverty, is called a “redeemer”. Jesus as our Redeemer means he has taken us in as his next-of-kin and then took on the burden of our trouble. Isaiah 35 highlights joy. Its opposite is sorrow. In his kingdom, sorrow and sighing will flee away, never to return.