

"Joy for Zion"
Isaiah 33:1-35:10
Dennis Watson

INTRODUCTION FROM CALVIN

One of my favorite comic strips is the old "Calvin and Hobbes" strip done by Bill Watterson. For those of you who are not familiar with that strip, it's about a little boy named Calvin, who is wonderfully excess with exuberance, creativity, imagination and self-confidence. Calvin has a friend, an imaginary friend perhaps, his tiger whose name is Hobbes. In the comic every frame where Calvin and Hobbes are together by themselves, Hobbes is a real tiger. Every frame where Calvin and Hobbes are pictured with a friend or parent of Calvin, Hobbes is strictly a stuffed tiger. But whether stuffed or real, after a while it really doesn't matter; Hobbes is real in your mind.

In one of my favorite panels, Calvin is digging a hole. Hobbes comes up and asks, "Why are you digging a hole?" Calvin replies, "I am looking for buried treasure!" Hobbes asks, "What have you found?" and Calvin answers, "A few dirty rocks, a weird root, and some disgusting grubs." Hobbes exclaims, "On your first try?" With exuberance Calvin proclaims, "There's treasure everywhere!"

Why are you digging in Isaiah? Are you looking for buried treasure? What have you found? "...a few dirty rocks, a weird root, and some disgusting grubs?"

At times as we study Isaiah that is all it seems we discover. HOWEVER, I am here to tell you that THERE IS TREASURE EVERYWHERE! Even in each of these chapters in Isaiah. Including chapter 34. However, it may require a second or third look. It may require some work or meditation before you recognize the treasure. With spit and elbow grease, you may find some genuine diamonds.

THE MEMORY VERSE

The memory verse is a beautiful verse: Isaiah 35:10 – And the ransomed of the Lord will return, And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

How does that verse get to become a memory verse?

THE MEMORY VERSE BEAUTY PAGEANT

The beautiful verses get picked. It is like there was a beauty pageant. All the verses of the section line up, in evening gowns, and each individual verse sings her version of The Battle Hymn of The Republic, or shares some talent: they can juggle, and then they all tell us what they desire for the children of the world, and some are

eliminated at the beginning, the ugly ones are out, and then finally the votes are cast and the tiara on the head of one verse becomes the memory verse for lesson 14: Isaiah 35:10.

I have to admit, early on in my study of this section, I began to feel sorry for the ugly verses of lesson 14, and there are a lot of them. And I don't mean sorry for the runners-ups who were on stage and were close to being the most beautiful and had to pretend to be happy when the winner was crowned. I began to feel sorry for those verses that got eliminated early on: the ugly verses down in the auditorium basement, with their evening gowns thrown into a heap, as they sit, smoking, drinking gin and playing cards. They have already been eliminated. They never even had a chance. But, I thought, even these verses are still a part of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16 says even these verses are still "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (as is all Scripture)." So, in honor of the many ugly verses of lesson 14, I have spent more time than usual walking among them, learning something of what they are about and why they are there. I even began giving some of those ugly verses their own awards:

MOST WORRISOME TO THE NON-ELECT – 34:5 "My sword is satiated in heaven, behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom, and upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction."

MOST UNCONGENIAL – 34:2 "For the Lord's indignation is against all nations, and His wrath against all their armies; He has utterly destroyed them, He has given them over to slaughter."

And then I got into the real spirit of Isaiah and gave them awards as if Isaiah were doing it himself:

MOST LIKELY TO CAUSE SOMEONE TO VOMIT – 34:3 "So their slain will be thrown out, and their corpses will give off their stench, and the mountains will be drenched with their blood."

WHY ARE THESE VERSES BOTHERING?

Oh, there are some highlights:

I like verse 33:2 – Be our salvation (but then it says) in the time of distress.

33:4 – indicates that the Lord would be the stability of your times. But this is being said just before Assyria invades.

I like 33:20 – giving the indication that stakes will never be pulled up. But it is surrounded by I think a metaphor of canals and rivers without ships, and I don't understand this yet.

I do like 3:22 – A class in high school Civics. Why do we have checks and balances in our branches of government? Because we need them.

These verses bothered me and I wondered why? Did anybody else get bothered by these ugly verses? So I decided I was going to study and meditate and pray that I would be caused to grow by these ugly verses. I was going to take God at His Word (2 Tim. 3:16) and find teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness in these ugly verses and not just skip them as is my custom, and to go on to the perky verses that are uplifting and bright. I will end my lecture with those though. In my struggles to find meaning and the mind of God in these verses, I came up with some conclusions. In humility, I don't know if this will help you in your quest for understanding, but let me share my thoughts. This is new ground for me folks, this was not out of books; this was from meditating on these verses as I drove over 2000 miles in the last week.

This lesson includes the end of chapter 33 and the beginning of chapter 34. Do you know where that puts us in our study of Isaiah? How many chapters in Isaiah? That's right – 66. We are halfway through the study of Isaiah right now.

But this is like a football game where one team is getting trounced. It's the nations against God, the Supremacy Bowl. Halftime comes and the trounced team (the Nations) hope that things will change with a pep talk and they come back out on the field for the second half and things get even worse.

At the end of the first half, in Isaiah chapter 33, God nails, judges and condemns what country? Assyria. At the beginning of chapter 34, God nails, judges and condemns what country? Edom. I found these chapters, especially 34, to be dark chapters, one ugly verse after another and I decided to live among those ugly verses for a while rather than run to the bright lights in verses of encouragement.

HINTS FROM THE END

I am writing a book. Actually, I am writing many books, I will probably never finish even one of them. However, I have begun a book which I have titled, IN CONCLUSION. It is a book which takes the last thought of each of the 66 books of the Bible and then I explore, and generally become a windbag, about the use and impact of that concluding thought as compared with the whole idea of the book that it is concluding. For instance, do you know what the last thought of the entire book of Psalms is? "Let all that hath life and breath praise the Lord."

Isaiah 66:24 is an interesting conclusion to the Book which we are now halfway through. Once again, like in our memory verse, Isaiah is talking about coming to Zion. Isaiah 66:23,24 says: "All mankind will come to bow down before Me, says the Lord. Then they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind."

Same word for abhorrence is used in Daniel 12:2, where we are told at the end of the tribulation: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt (or abhorrence)."

This is amazing if these words are saying that some pile of putrefied, rotting, burning, stinking corpses is what will represent sin and its effect in the Kingdom. All mankind will be horrified and will abhor this spectacle of sin in God's Kingdom economy.

I thought there would be no sin in heaven. Well, there will seem to be some representation of it and it will be seen by all mankind and will be abhorred by all mankind.

As I thought about that, I realize that so often, this, now, is not how I look at sin. I am attracted by it. I sometimes find myself close to the edge as if to get just a little better view. I pardon it, I excuse myself and other people, particularly people I love (I guess that includes myself, doesn't it?). I realize I am not righteous, as God is righteous.

Sin is abhorrent to God; it should be to us. I think this is what causes me to be bothered. I am not having the right reaction to sin. How abhorrent is sin to God?

I am mindful of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as He hung on the cross, there came a point in time when a great reality occurred; so real that it was like magic, so real that created beings, including Satan, could not predict that it would occur. The incredible reality that occurred was Jesus Christ became sin for us. He did not commit sin, He became sin, that was the reality that was amazing.

But God abhors sin and separated Himself in some manner from the very first begotten Son. I do not understand the mechanics of this. I know only God understands. I believe I will understand it better when I am with Him. But for now, I only feel this truth momentarily, as if I could catch a small glimpse, through and between the tall trees, as I drive by.

And it was at this point, when Jesus who had committed no sin, but who had become sin, cries out, "My Lord, My Lord, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?" It was God, who had become sin, blaming God for the separation that had occurred. Isn't that like sin? It tries to blame someone else for the separation.

This is where these dark verses of Isaiah 33 and 34 led me. To the cross and to think of the abhorrence and contempt that God the Father, experienced as He looked on His only begotten Son, who had become sin. It took my breath away.

THE HARSH SIDE OF GOD

I don't think that you can come to the conclusion as we study these dark verses of Isaiah, that there is a harsh side to our God. As I thought about this more, I realized that everything that if anything, Isaiah should be helping us to learn to tremble before our God.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE? A DIFFICULT PERSON OR A DIFFICULT MESSAGE?

Just a side thought – I am always interested in what Isaiah himself was like. I keep looking in this book to find some idea somewhere that Isaiah was just a regular guy. I want him to be the type person who, when you would come out of the house at the same time as him, would say, "Hey! How ya doing?" And I would say, "Oh, just fine." And then he would say, "Looks like it might rain!" and I would say, "Well, you're the Prophet!" and we would both laugh and then go back into the house. But I am getting no signals that this would be true.

Isaiah may have been a difficult person to live with at home. Imagine him mad at Maher-Shalal-Hasb-Baz. "Abandon thine objects of mirth, where they shall be saddened by their loneliness as they gather dust in the shadows of the portico." "Dad, do you mean I am on restriction?" I have a feeling "Dad, do you mean..." was said a lot in Isaiah's house. "Set thy face toward thy separate habitation and there alone thou shalt drink an abundance of thy fallen countenance." "Dad, do you mean I am grounded to my room? Mom, why doesn't Dad talk normal???!?" And then the prophetess says, "O be easy on Isaiah, your Dad, son. You know how upset he gets when he receives messages of judgment from God. It puts him in a bad mood."

A HARSH SIDE TO GOD'S JUSTICE?

God is just – therefore He must punish sin...with death! But you say, "God has forgiven my sin...I will not be punished now if I sin. Don't make that argument to Ananias and Sapphira. They won't buy it. Don't be fooled, there is a sin unto death. There were those in the church at Corinth who God took out, they died, because their sin was causing detriment to the growth of the church.

God is harsh. He will punish sin. Who takes the punishment for your sin now as a Christian? Jesus Christ does. You add to the burden He bore by your sin. That should be abhorrent to a believer. Sin should be abhorrent. I wish I could see sin as the putrefied, rotting, burning corpse that Isaiah tells us that it is. We would stay away from it if we could see it for what it really is.

A HARSH SIDE TO GOD'S LOVE?

There is a harsh side to God's love. Hebrews 12:6 – "For those whom the Lord loves **He disciplines...**"

Why does His love have a harsh side? Because it is real love that wants to see us up to our best. It is not a mamby, pamby, excusing, eye-fluttering love. It is a tough love that requires a person to be what God wants and does not allow those He loves to be just who they are. God wants us to learn to be holy, and He is so loving, He tells us how, even though it is hard.

Isaiah 1:16 [Just before we are told "Come now, and let us reason together...] Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; reprove the ruthless; defend the orphans; plead for the widow.

And then from the beginning, we look to the middle in Isaiah 33:14. Isaiah asks the following: Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning? [by not being a part of the horrible spectacle] Walk righteously; speak with sincerity; reject unjust gain; hold no bribe; stop ears from hearing about bloodshed; shuts his eyes from looking upon evil; dwell on the heights; make the rock your refuge.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH EDMO?

I found no kind word, no happy thought, no warm feelings AT ALL in chapter 34. This is a harsh condemnation directed apparently, from verse 6, at Edom. God says through Isaiah: v.6 "The Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah; and a great slaughter in the land of Edom."

It talks about the land from a geographical standpoint: And its land shall become like burning pitch. And it shall not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall go up forever; from generation to generation, it shall be desolate; none shall pass through it forever and ever.

Desolation and emptiness are its standards.

In the questions, we looked a little at Edom's history.

- 1) Edom is the country containing the people that are descendants of Esau.
- 2) Through Jacob we have the descendants reaching down to Jesus.
- 3) Through Esau we have the descendants reaching through Idumea to Herod the Great.

Can we conclude from Isaiah chapter 34 that God has rejected Edom? YES.
Why?

1. Originated from Esau who despised his birthright.
2. Numbers 20:21 – They would not let the people of Israel pass through.
This is interesting. You recall the story. Israel was camped at Kadesh-Barnea and Moses wanted to take the children of Israel and go on the east side of the Dead Sea up to enter Caanan in that area. So, they left and traveled for perhaps many weeks to get close to that area. This route would require them to climb through a pass in the mountains that belonged to Edom. The king of Edom said, “no.” Moses asked again stating we won’t be a bother, we will pay you for any water our animals drink and still the king of Edom said, “no go.” They had already traveled towards the pass, but now had to double back to go around these mountains. And the people grumbled. This is where the people grumbled, “there is no bread, no water and we loathe this miserable food.” What miserable food? Manna. Here is what I learned early on. Do not complain to the cook! Especially when God is the cook!
3. Amos 1:11 – Edom “stifled its compassion, and pursued his brother with the sword, and he was always angry.”
4. There is a psalm in Scripture that has always bothered me. It is so harsh, that I have never wanted to spend much time with it. Psalm 137 talks about how Israel reacted when Babylon tormented Israel and destroyed the city. We get the picture that Edom sat on the sidelines cheering on, and perhaps even helping, the Babylonians who were razing the city. Then the Psalmist says: Psalm 137:7-9, “Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom the day of Jerusalem, who said, “Raze it! Raze it!” to its very foundation. O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one, how blessed will be the one who repays you with the recompense with which you have repaid us. How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock.”

There is a harsh side to God. I do not see things His way yet. I do not understand the theological truth that is expressed by the concept of being born a sinner. I see a child, innocent by my standards, and I recoil at the thought that God’s judgment is meted out against them. But I believe there are truths that are greater than my understanding, and I am willing to allow God to be God.

These are hard verses. Ugly verses. But they tell us about God. Perhaps more about our God than we want to know. They tell us that our God is a God who deserves fear, our trembling and our lives.

PROPHECY FULFILLED – THE DESERT BLOSSOMS – THE EYES OF THE BLIND OPENED

Chapter 35 – Not the same as if I were a Jew that really loved the land of Israel. There is joy in seeing prophecy being fulfilled.

Israel newly established nation after 1900 years.
When you see the olive tree blossom.
Worms at work making the soil fertile.
Aquifers discovered.

The fulfillment of prophecy should give you encouragement. This is how our Lord and Savior used Isaiah to encourage us. We're reading the same books that Jesus did.

"And the ransomed of the Lord will return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, sorrow and sighing will flee away."