

“Joy for Zion”
Isaiah 33:1 – 35:10
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A former lecturer in People of the Word once asked, “Have you ever wondered what Isaiah the prophet was like? Was he just like a regular next-door neighbor? I mean, what if one day, you and he came out of your houses at the same time and he’d wave and say, “Hey! How ya doing?” And you’d say, “Oh, just fine.” And then he would say, “Looks like it might rain!” And you’d say, “Well, *you’re* the prophet!” and you’d both laugh and then go back into your houses. I guess Isaiah could have been just a regular guy, but we’ll get more insight into who he was and how he felt as we continue to study his book.

Since the book of Isaiah has 66 chapters, we’re halfway through as we start this lesson with chapter 33. A brief summary of chapters 33-35, is ‘judgment and joy’:

- Chapter 33: God judged and condemned Assyria.
- Chapter 34: God judged and condemned Edom (the nations).
- Chapter 35: God promised joy for the redeemed (that’s us!).

Isaiah’s writings were not only for the people during his time but also are warnings and promises for us as well. Most of his prophecies in these chapters had both near-term fulfillments concerning Judah and its enemies, and future fulfillments that would occur hundreds of years later when the Messiah arrived, and fulfillments beyond then to the “end times.”

CHAPTER 33: THE PROMISE OF HELL AND HEAVEN

We’ve been learning that instead of Judah putting their faith in Almighty God, they put their trust in the very nation that wanted to destroy them, the world power of the day, the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were treacherous and cruel. History records that often when cities were surrounded by the Assyrian army, the inhabitants would commit suicide rather than be taken captive.

The king of Judah paid Assyria thousands of pounds of silver and gold for protection, but after taking the bribe, Assyria continued to attack them. Relying on **anyone** but God, fails.

Chapter 33 is the final “woe” on Judah. Assyria, the destroyer/betrayer will eventually be destroyed by God. “Woe to you, destroyer, you who have not been destroyed! Woe to you, betrayer, you who have not been betrayed! When you stop destroying, you will be destroyed; when you stop betraying, you will be betrayed.” (33:1) Though chapter 33 points specifically to the Assyrian enemy, the prophecy looks beyond Assyria to **any** power that will set itself against God’s people. What enemy nations will sow against Israel, they will reap.

God’s people were broken. The failure of their own self-reliance led them to plead for deliverance through Isaiah: “Lord, be gracious to us; we long for you. Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress.” (33:2) Don’t we sometimes follow this same pattern - relying on our own power to solve problems? But when the trial isn’t resolved or is too great, **then** we pray. Isaiah prayed for God’s strength to be present each morning. Our thoughts and emotions can rob us of victories and blessings so we too should begin each morning seeking God’s grace and strength.

This next verse emphasizes the power and authority of God when He intervenes in the Assyrians’ siege: “At the uproar of your army, the peoples flee; when you rise up, the nations scatter.” (33:3) The near-fulfillment is that God would intervene. Isaiah warned that nations who plunder will also be

plundered. The future-fulfillment is that at the end of the Tribulation, again God will intervene and defeat evil.

“Your plunder, O nations, is harvested... like a swarm of locusts...” (33:4) Scholars believe this verse foretells the battle of Armageddon, when the armies will be as numerous and as devastating as swarms of locusts.

No nation is able to fight against God and win, so when He reached out His hand, the tables were turned. “The Lord is exalted, for He dwells on high; He will fill Zion with His justice and righteousness. He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure.” (33:5,6) The key to a sure spiritual treasure is the fear of the Lord. Other Scriptures echo this truth: Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” and Proverbs 14:27: “The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.” Fear of the Lord isn’t terror, but trust, reverent awe and wonder, recognizing God’s supremacy.

During the Assyrian invasion Isaiah foresees Judah’s devastation and brokenness. “Look, their brave men cry aloud in the streets; the envoys of peace weep bitterly.” (33:7) Judah’s heroes will weep in public; peace negotiators will also because the treaties failed. Psalm 118:8-9 reminds us, “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.” Isaiah’s words urge us to look beyond diplomats and rulers to secure our future and depend upon the Lord who alone can save.

Judah’s roads will be abandoned. Beautiful and fertile places will shrivel up. “The highways will be deserted; no travelers [will be] on the roads. The land [will dry] up and waste away.” (33:8,9)

When the power of Judah’s oppressor reaches its highpoint, the near-fulfillment of this prophesy will be that the Lord will rise up, fight for His people, and defeat the enemy. “Now will I arise,” says the Lord. “Now will I be exalted; now will I be lifted up. You conceive chaff, you give birth to straw; your breath is a fire that consumes you. The peoples will be burned to ashes; like cut thornbushes they will be set ablaze. You who are far away, hear what I have done; you who are near, acknowledge My power (33:10-13) Future-fulfillment will be when Messiah returns to defeat the wicked world. The enemies’ plans will fail, and their wickedness will consume them. It’s believed this is foretelling the destruction at Armageddon when God will put down the final enemies of Israel and will receive worldwide acknowledgment of His power from **all** peoples, both Jews and Gentiles.

The godless in Judah ask one another, “The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: ‘Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?’” (33:14) Basically they asked: “If God wiped out the Assyrian army, who can endure His presence?” Isaiah answered: “Those who walk righteously and speak what is right, who reject gain from extortion and keep their hands from accepting bribes, who stop their ears against plots of murder and shut their eyes against contemplating evil, they are the ones who will dwell on the heights, whose refuge will be the mountain fortress. Their bread will be supplied, and water will not fail them.” (33:15,16)

The prophet Micah confirms: “He [the Lord] has shown you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) Only those who align their life with God’s standards, will dwell with the powerful, sovereign God.

The remainder of chapter 33 speaks to the future with the Messiah. “Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.” (33:17) The near-fulfillment may refer to Judah’s King Hezekiah, yet in the future, those who walk with God will be the ones to see “**the** King in His beauty” - the Messiah, when He comes to the earth in power and glory. Seeing Him will be the greatest glory for the child of God but will be the greatest terror for those who set their heart against Him.

To Judah, Isaiah says: “In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror: “Where is that chief officer? Where is the one who took the revenue? Where is the officer in charge of the towers?” You will see those arrogant people no more, people whose speech is obscure, whose language is strange and incomprehensible.” (33:18,19) Isaiah prophesied the Assyrian’s reign of terror would end and Judah will wonder where their enemy had gone.

The following verses point to a future-fulfillment. There will be peace when Jesus establishes His kingdom of God on earth and reigns in Zion. “Look on Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved; its stakes will never be pulled up, nor any of its ropes broken. There the Lord will be our Mighty One. It will be like a place of broad rivers and streams. No galley with oars will ride them, no mighty ship will sail them.” (33:20,21) When the King of kings returns, Zion will be liberated and be a place of joyous festivals and tranquility. It will be permanent and indestructible; not one of its “tent stakes” will ever be removed. When they see the Messiah, the redeemed will exclaim: “For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is He who will save us.” (33:22)

Isaiah provided even more glorious news that points to the millennial age: “No one living in Zion will say, ‘I am ill’ and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven.” (33:24) When Christ returns to rule, Jerusalem will be free of physical and spiritual problems - no sickness or suffering.

God answered Isaiah’s prayer, both with His promise of hell - an everlasting fire for the wicked – and a promise of heaven - a dwelling place for the redeemed. Yet, before Jesus sets up His kingdom and reigns in Jerusalem, the nations of the earth are going to experience the most horrific bloodbath in the history of man.

CHAPTER 34: JUDGMENT AGAINST THE NATIONS

Chapter 34 describes judgments from God against all wicked nations because of their rebellion against Him and their opposition against His people. In particular it focuses on the destruction of Edom, which here, refers to **all** wicked nations.

Isaiah painted terrifying pictures of God's wrath that aligns with times in the future known as the Great Tribulation and the Day of Vengeance/Day of the Lord. God’s judgment will be catastrophic in its devastation and will be the final reckoning for those who opposed Him. There will be a cosmic upheaval when the heavens will be “rolled up like a scroll” and stars will fall, signifying a complete upending of creation.

The Lord doesn’t pronounce judgments without warnings, so He summoned the nations to listen to Him. “Come near, you nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it! The Lord is angry with all nations; His wrath is on all their armies. He will totally destroy them; He will give them over to slaughter.” (34:1,2)

The following verse echoes Revelation when God’s enemies will one day be gathered together in battle, and He will destroy all who fight against Him. Isaiah said: “Their slain will be thrown out; their dead bodies will stink; the mountains will be soaked with their blood. All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine like shriveled figs from the fig tree.” (34:3,4) Some say these cosmic events describe a nuclear explosion and they mirror descriptions in the New Testament of a catastrophic unfolding of the universe.

Edom refers to the world in general, specifically, the unsaved. “The sword of the Lord is bathed in blood...For the Lord has a great slaughter in the land of Edom. The land will be drenched with blood....”

(34:5;6a,b;7b) God will slaughter the armies of the world who pit themselves against Him. That the land will be soaked in blood foretells as Revelation says, that in the battle of Armageddon: “blood flowed in a stream about 180 miles long and as high as a horse’s bridle.”

“For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause.” (34:8) God will pour out His wrath on the wicked and unbelieving world. However, believers rejoice! 1 Thessalonians says Jesus will rescue the redeemed from the coming wrath!

The following describes the utter desolation of the nation of Edom: “Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night or day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation, it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.” (34:9,10) The land will be uninhabitable with fires burning continuously. It’s believed that in Isaiah’s wording about “generations” meant that the wrath of God against sin is eternal.

In verses 11-17, God will bring complete destruction upon nations, leaders, and the land:

1. God will assign the desolated land to various forms of bird life, wild animals, scavengers, and desert creatures as sign of judgment, suggesting humans will be gone and wildlife will thrive.
2. There will be an absence of leadership which won’t be a problem because there won’t be people to lead.
3. Thorns and thistles, representing sin, will cover symbols of protection - fortresses.

To put it mildly, the earth will be bleak and barren because the world willfully shook their rebellious fists at God. The destiny of the wicked is eternity without God. While there’s still time, those who don’t know Jesus must also know the ominous and dreadful truth that a day is coming when all will stand before Him.

No one knows when the global tribulations will start but Jesus said there will be signs, like initial birth pains which might begin before we’re raptured to heaven. Jesus also said: “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:36)

As with all of His Word, God’s promises will be fulfilled exactly as He has said. “Look in the scroll of the Lord and read: None of these will be missing... For it is His mouth that has given the order, and His Spirit will gather them together.” (34:16) Just as the Bereans examined Scriptures to verify teachings they received, we too are to look to God’s Word and verify His promises to see that “none of them will be missing.”

CHAPTER 35: PARADISE AFTER JUDGMENT

In contrast to the horrific accounts of judgment, death, and destruction in Isaiah 34, chapter 35 is a powerful message of God’s promises that:

Wastelands will be gardens
Weak will be strong
Blind will be sighted; deaf will hear; lame will leap; mute will speak
Droughts will be drenched
A road of righteousness will lead to Zion
The Messiah will reign

Isaiah’s prophetic poetry tells of nature’s restoration from God’s curse to God’s blessing: “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom...it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy...Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand

will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.” (35:1; 2;6b; 7) One day, God will transform the wilderness, breathing life into what humans and sin had destroyed, and in its ultimate fulfillment, what was dry and useless will become fruitful and beautiful.

The exiles from Judah will lose their temple, land, and freedom. Isaiah encouraged them to be strong because God would come with vengeance to save His long-oppressed people. “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, He will come with vengeance; with divine retribution He will come to save you.’” (35:3,4) This is also viewed as a future prophesy when Jesus, the Messiah returns.

He will bring health to those who have lived with disabilities and disease: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” (35:5,6a) I’m sure we all have someone in mind, including ourselves, who will no longer suffer in the temporary, decaying tents we inhabit in this fallen world.

And while we’re still on this earth, we’ll experience another of God’s promises, but first, since we’re two weeks into the new year, let me ask you: “How’s your New Year’s resolutions going?” or what I prefer to call, “casual promises to myself that I’m under no legal obligation to fulfill.” Statistics say by the 2nd Friday in January most people have already broken their resolutions, so I don’t even try.

However, this year, with the Holy Spirit’s help, I’m inviting Him to make me more and more like Jesus as I continue my spiritual journey on what Isaiah called, the *Highway of Holiness*. “A highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way... (35:8a)

In 1684, John Bunyan, an English Puritan preacher published his book, *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It’s a classic parable about a man’s journey to salvation. The main character is a man named Christian who left the City of Destruction, the sin-filled world, to travel on a highway to the Celestial City – heaven. Christian sees lions on the sides of the highway and is terrified. But a guide tells Christian, “Don’t be afraid of the lions. If you stay on the road, you’ll be safe.” Now that I’ve studied more about Isaiah chapter 35, I see how *Pilgrim’s Progress* bears very interesting parallels to what Isaiah wrote about the *Highway*.

Isaiah’s prophesy about the *Highway to Holiness* was both near and future oracles. Via the *Highway* or the *Way of Holiness*, the scattered Israelite exiles would return to Zion/Jerusalem. However, the *Highway* has a broader application.

Jesus said: “I am the “Way, the Truth, and the Life.” (John 14:6) The future-fulfillment of the prophesy refers to Christ, the Way of grace that redeems us from sin. Only the redeemed - the ransomed of the Lord, those who acknowledge Jesus as God’s Son and called upon Him to save them, may travel the *Highway* on their journey to Zion - heaven. “The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.” (35:8b)

A believer’s journey on the *Highway of Holiness* begins at the moment of their salvation when the Holy Spirit indwells them. The *Highway* symbolizes their journey of “sanctification”, that is, of being “set apart” from the world of sin and is a journey of continual, spiritual growth.

Ravenous beasts, or lions, are symbols of wicked people and they won’t be on the *Highway*. “No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there.” (35:9) And there won’t be a toll to pay to travel on the *Highway* because the price has been paid by Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon wrote this about the *Highway of Holiness*: “Engineering has done much to tunnel mountains and bridge abysses. But the greatest triumph of engineering is [that the Lord] made a way from sin to holiness, from death to life, from condemnation to perfection. Who could make a road over the mountains of our iniquities but Almighty God? None but the Lord of love would have wished it; none but the God of wisdom could have devised it; none but the God of power could have carried it out.”

As we travel on the *Highway to Holiness*, remember what God has told us, “This is the way; walk in it.” (Isaiah 30:21) “I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel.” (Psalm 32:8) “Listen for God’s voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; He’s the one who will keep you on track.” (Proverbs 3:6)

Here’s an **especially** good part! At the end of our journey will be **joy**!: “and those the Lord has rescued will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” (35:10) Chapter 35 began with the **desert** shouting for joy and it ends with the **redeemed** singing for joy.

Formerly feeble knees will walk to, and in, Zion. Fearful hearts will no longer be afraid. Silent tongues will sing songs of joy. (I fully expect in my new body I will be able to sing better than Celine Dion!) Sorrow and sighing will no longer exist when we see God’s glory and experience His presence.

In this lesson, Isaiah prophesied the curse of God’s judgment coming upon His creation – the animals, land, heavens and mankind. In chapter 35 God promises there will be transformation of nature that will come when the Messiah reigns and believers will be glorified.

Apostle Paul confirms: “The earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope, because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.” (Romans 8:19-22)

May this message encourage you to remember God has a glorious future planned for us and for His creation!