

## The Merciful Man Who Dwells on High: Isaiah 33

by Ward Fenley

As so many of the prophets regularly do, Isaiah explains the situation that has come upon Israel for her sins in chapter 33. In verse one Isaiah declares woes to the sinful kingdom. In verse two he prays for God to be gracious in the time of trouble wherein Judah would flee the nations and be scattered. Yet he (Isaiah) faithfully declares God's exaltation and righteousness (vs. 5), though the land was languishing and shame had filled the hearts of men for their sins. Through Isaiah God asks the question:

Isaiah 33:14 The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?

God promised they would be taken away, yet we also know that Israel would be restored after the Babylonian captivity. So how could God make the threat of an apparent everlasting destruction of the nation? It is at this point that Isaiah moves into a beautiful prophecy concerning the eternal kingdom of God set up through Messiah and His redeeming work on the cross. Isaiah begins this prophecy with statements that contradict the shameful hypocrisy of the sinners in earthly Zion:

Isaiah 33:15-16 He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; 16 He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure.

The oppressions of the Jews upon their neighbors were such that the hypocrites would not follow, as Jesus said:

Matthew 23:4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers)

Even Peter echoed this:

Acts 15:10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

The Jews of both Isaiah's and Jesus' time in their extreme hypocrisy oppressed their neighbors through self-righteousness. Through bribery (perhaps sacrifices and offerings), lying in wait for blood (seeking to find God's people in sin—e.g. the adulterous woman caught in the very act), hearing of blood (hearing gossip, backbiting, and slander of the people of God), and seeing evil (not overlooking a transgression as Solomon prescribes (Proverbs 10:12 Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.)), the hypocrites of earthly Zion not only contradicted the God of mercy, they established themselves above God in the judgment of their neighbor, for they judged unrighteous judgment after the seeing of their eyes and the hearing of their ears:

Luke 12:57 Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right?

John 7:24 Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

John 8:15 Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man.

In so doing they exalted themselves above God:

2 Thessalonians 2:4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

But quite contrary to these sinners in Zion, the merciful man would dwell on high (vs. 16). Compare this with a later prophecy in Isaiah:

Isaiah 57:15 For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

It is the contrite and broken spirit that has the heart of mercy, a heart whose existence would be with the high and lofty one that inhabits eternity. Mercy is the character of the one who obtains the kingdom: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Lying in wait to find our brother's sins is not mercy. The one who hides or covers a multitude of sins demonstrates the character and righteousness of God. This is the one who has truly been forgiven much. For "the one who is forgiven much loves much" (Luke 7:47). The following verses in Isaiah 33 describe the inheritance of those who demonstrate the mercy of God, i.e. those upon whom God's love has descended:

Isaiah 33:16-24 He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure. 17 Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off 18 Thine heart shall meditate terror. Where is the scribe? where is the receiver? where is he that counted the towers? 19 Thou shalt not see a fierce people, a people of a deeper speech than thou canst perceive; of a stammering tongue, that thou canst not understand. 20 Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. 21 But there the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. 22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us. 23 Thy tacklings are loosed; they could not well strengthen their mast, they could not spread the sail: then is the prey of a great spoil divided; the lame take the prey. 24 And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.

God is the defense of the merciful man. God protects the merciful man from those who would lay charges against him. God would be his Rock and Fortress:

Psalm 91:2 I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

In verse 17 Isaiah promises that the eyes of the merciful will see the king in His beauty. Through the Gospel God's people see the King, the Lord Jesus Christ:

Romans 15:20-21 Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: 21 But as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand.

David longed to see this beauty:

Psalms 27:4 One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.

The beauty of the Lord would be found in His Temple, a Temple comprised of Himself and His people:

2 Corinthians 6:16 ...for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Hebrews 8:10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God *is*

Revelation 21:22 And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

Jesus promised that eternal life would come to those who believe on Him for deliverance. This is the same eternity that the high and lofty one inhabits: an eternity that begins not at one's entrance into the grave nor at a mysterious disappearance and soaring through the literal clouds, but this life is gained in fullness through faith in Christ: with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

Romans 10:6-11 But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) 7 Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) 8 But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; 9 That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For

the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

Isaiah continues to expound on the blessings with that which confronts the merciful man, the fear of man:

Isaiah 33:18 Thine heart shall meditate terror. Where is the scribe? where is the receiver? where is he that counted the towers?

They knew that the debaters and scribes and Pharisees brought the accusations against them. They knew that their lives were in the hands of those who could stone them in an instant. Even the writer of Hebrews declared that under Moses' law one died without mercy under two or three witnesses. But this great prophecy asks these somewhat rhetorical questions, as if to say: "Merciful man, do you fear the Scribe's judgments? Do you fear the disputer's face? Do you tremble at the thought of a debater who can make you look foolish with the depth of his conversation?" God then comforts the man with the promise that Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, would be a quiet place and a tabernacle that would never be taken down. Unlike what was presently happening to the Jewish nation, which was being seized by Babylon. Interestingly God calls Jerusalem the tabernacle. As we read in Revelation, through Christ's work the tabernacle of God would dwell with men. This tabernacle is the heavenly Jerusalem. John saw this city coming down from God out of heaven as a Bride (the church) adorned for her husband. It is this same Jerusalem to which believers have come, according to the writer of Hebrews:

Hebrews 12:22-24 But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, 23 To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

Isaiah's declaration of the quietness of this city represents that people of God experiencing the comfort of God's forgiveness and mercy, having had their transgressions removed as far as the east is from the west. Sins about which God declares, "their sins and their iniquities I will remember no more." Jerusalem, the quiet habitation, is the church of Jesus Christ, the heavenly city living out their eternal life in God.

The prophet promises that not one of the stakes would ever be removed. In contrast to the Old Covenant, whose members could be put to death or cast out of the camp with one overt, or even ignorant, transgression, God's people (stakes) would never be removed. Perhaps these stakes represent the foundation of the apostles and prophets, upon which the city was built:

Ephesians 2:19-22 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: 22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Revelation 21:9-14 And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. 10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; 12 And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: 13 On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Many view the "rivers and streams" of similar prophecies as literal waterways that rush through a physical kingdom here on planet earth. But God explains the metaphor in no uncertain terms in this revealing chapter:

Isaiah 33:21 But there the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.

God is the place of broad rivers. In Him are the living waters and streams:

John 4:10 Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

John 4:14 But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

Revelation 21:6 And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

Revelation 22:1 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Revelation 22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

Those last passages show the inseparable relationship between the throne of God and the water of life. It is Christ which flows through His people, who are the Temple:

John 7:38 He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

Within the same verse the prophet exclaims that no galley or gallant vessel will pass

by it. This seems to represent the refusal of God to dwell with those who are built up in the pride of the heart, refusing to submit themselves to the righteousness of Christ. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:29 "That no flesh should glory in His presence." The heavenly city is a city characterized by humility and mercy, not pride and judgment. The proud will not dwell there. The characteristic of pride is mercilessness and self-righteousness. The high and lofty one dwells with those who are of a broken and contrite spirit, i.e. those who have trusted solely in the righteousness of Christ as opposed to their own righteousness, which the prophet says is filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The fact that these gallant ships cannot go by the city is further stressed by the following statement:

John 7:38 He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

That is, why would the gallant ships not pass by? Remember, these gallant ships represent the self-righteous and those who glory in the flesh who attacked and accused the people of God. The reason they cannot pass by the city is because God is the city's Lawgiver and Judge. In Romans an important question is followed by an equally important statement:

Romans 8:33 Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

Some scholars believe that the statement following the question is actually another question: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? God who justifies?" In other words, would the very God who justified you bring a charge against you? God forbid? Certainly He alone has the right to lay charges, but not against His own power and decrees. And certainly the accusers of the brethren, against whom Paul is writing, could not bring a charge. Why? Because God is the Justifier. God is the Lawgiver. God is the Judge. So then, let's review the text in Isaiah:

Isaiah 33:21-22 But there the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. 22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

The reason the proud cannot pass by the city is because God is the Lawgiver. He writes the laws. He makes the judgments. And if He has judged with righteous judgment to the extent that now God's people have His righteousness, then no one can come against that judgment. Passing by the city would mean they could gawk at the people of God and still level accusations against them. In the physical kingdom of Zion and Jerusalem, this was the case. In the kingdom of Christ who reigns in the heart, this is impossibility. For the accusers have no access to the realm which God has seized, namely, the conscience under Christ. He has taken the keys of Death and Hell. Whether they rail and gnash their teeth, we are safe because of His work. Now, if the righteousness was the work of the people, then surely the conscience could be violated and brought under condemnation. But there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Just as the Jews were set free through Christ from the Old

Covenant body of death, (or body of Moses) into the body of Christ (the church), so through faith we, two thousand years later, are brought into that life and body through faith in Christ. We must compare the gallant ships of Isaiah 33 with the accusers of the brethren in the first century. They were cast down through the work of Christ's cross, resurrection, and presence.

Of course, with God as the King, He would save them:

Isaiah 33:22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

It is necessary to show how often kingship is associated with deliverance and how this association would be very significant in the hearts of the Israelites, whose history was characterized by often disobedient Kings who worked no deliverance from the surrounding nations. Even more significant was the fact that the priests worked no deliverance from sin. Quite the contrary: they devoured the people of God through accusations, bitter words, and unrighteous judgment, loving to lord it over them just as the Gentiles did. Even the disciples were caught up with this mentality:

Matthew 20:24-25 And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren. 25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them.

Yet, in all this nature of the Israelites, they couldn't maintain a kingdom of deliverance from the nations or from sin. Their disease, as Jeremiah says, was incurable. No priest or king could save them. But frequently God predicts that one day, through His rule, He would bring deliverance:

Psalm 20:9 Save, LORD: let the king hear us when we call.

Hosea 13:10 I will be thy king: where is any other that may save thee in all thy cities? and thy judges of whom thou saidst, Give me a king and princes?

Psalm 74:12 For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Jeremiah 23:5-6 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. 6 In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.

This rule was brought about through the reign of Jesus Christ:

1 Timothy 1:17 Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

The prophet knew that the King, God, would save them. But the carnal mind would suppose that the salvation refers to a physical kingdom. Even the Jews sought to make Christ their physical King when He performed the miracles of feeding and healing. Yet Christ refused to take on this kingdom, for no kingdom of flesh can create a throne or habitation that could contain the Lord of glory:

Acts 17:24-25 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; 25 Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

Acts 7:48-49 Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet, 49 Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest?

Heaven is the throne of God, and it is upon this throne that He rules and reigns over the hearts of His people and the heavenly places. It is also upon this throne that He is boldly approached by the hearts of those upon whom He has had mercy:

Hebrews 4:14-16 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

The believer partakes of all the benefits of this kingdom and accesses all the rights of citizens ruled by a righteous King. The pleasure of finding grace to help in time of need is the key ingredient to comfort the people of God. God has saved, and has ruled in the hearts of His people. He has delivered. He has brought us into his everlasting kingdom for deliverance:

Colossians 1:13-14 Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: 14 In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:

There is some difficulty in interpreting the next verse in Isaiah 33:

Isaiah 33:23 Thy tacklings are loosed; they could not well strengthen their mast, they could not spread the sail: then is the prey of a great spoil divided; the lame take the prey.

However, contextually there seems to be a connection with the previous two verses. The prophet just declared that no gallant ship would pass by because God would be the Lawgiver, Savior, Judge, and King. The ropes (tacklings) could be referring to those things that held captive the people of God and that God loosened them. The pronoun *\*your\** seems to be contrasted with those who could not strengthen their mast (*\*they\**). The mast and sail of the gallant ships are ineffective against the people of God and the prey. God's people are identified as prey for the proud in



Ezekiel 34, out of whose mouths God would save them:

Ezekiel 34:8-10 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my flock; 9 Therefore, O ye shepherds, hear the word of the LORD; 10 Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them.

"The lame take the prey," Isaiah exclaims. This would seem to be a winning back of the prey taken by the lame themselves through the preaching of the Gospel. The great spoil is divided is that beautiful treasure of God's divided among themselves, to share in the wealth of that prey they have rescued through grace.

Finally, Isaiah removes any potential for misinterpreting the passage carnally by explicitly confirming the nature of this salvation or healing:

Isa 33:24 And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein *shall be forgiven their iniquity.*

What is true healing from sickness? Is it, as the carnal mind would suppose, an eternal kingdom of physical bodies having no more ailments or suffering? Or is it an eternal, immeasurable kingdom that is based upon the forgiveness of sin? The kingdom of heaven is perfect and righteous because it is inhabited by those who are forgiven. The kingdom of heaven is perfect because we are no longer sick. There is no more death, for in the kingdom of heaven the people of the King have eternal life through His power and resurrection. The kingdom of the carnal is a kingdom that seeks to have their bellies filled and perfect physical stature and existence. The kingdom of heaven is based solely upon the grace and power of God. Paul preached the kingdom of heaven and grace. It is a kingdom that counters culture and religion because culture and religion seeks carnal escapes to satisfy their hunger. But blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Some groups would say that a characteristic of true faith is no physical ailments or sickness. Again, this is carnal thinking. According to God, whose view should be preeminent, the characteristic of true faith is forgiveness of sin. We dwell in the land as the inhabitants of the heavenly Jerusalem, the church. Isaiah promised, we "shall not say, 'I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven of their iniquity.'" This must be fulfilled, for if we are indeed under the New Covenant, God speaks forcefully:

Hebrews 10:14-17 For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. 15 Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, 16 This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; 17 And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.

In Christ we are perfect and God has forgotten our iniquity. Why would we try to remind Him of it? Our privileged duty is to simply praise God and offer up the

sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to Him who has done exceedingly above all that we ever asked or thought or ever will ask or think. He has performed the miraculous. He has reconciled us to Himself and given us the ministry of reconciliation. Let us remind each other that we are in Him. Let us remind each other of restoration. We may say with conviction that we are healed and have been brought under the care of Him, under whose wings there is healing:

Malachi 4:2 But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.