

Isaiah 33

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[0 : 00] Well, through turning your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 33, Isaiah chapter 33, if you're ever to come this evening, we'd love to see you through.

! Isaiah 33, C.S. Lewis wrote these words about his conversion from atheism to Christianity. He says, you must picture me alone in that room in Magdalene, the college in Oxford. Night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted, even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of him, who I so earnestly desired not to meet.

That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929, I gave in and admitted that God was God, and Nelson prayed.

Perhaps that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not see then what was the most shining and obvious thing. The divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.

[1 : 23] The prodigal said at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in, kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape.

Now whether you or I realize it or not, Lewis is actually speaking for every single one of us.

Because you and I, we all come to God reluctantly.

We all return to God reluctantly. Because we find it so hard, don't we all of us, to give up control, to give up ownership. And leisure from our lives. But you see what C.S. Lewis discovered in this journey.

He speaks of this, divine humility. Divine humility which accepts a convert even on those terms of reluctance. That God is always more ready to meet us than we are to meet him.

And that is what we actually find in chapter 33. If you've been with us in this series, you will know that it's been very evident that the people of Jerusalem, they run in every direction for their safety, for their salvation, for their security.

[2 : 32] They run in every direction that is, apart from the direction which God is in. And yet, here in Isaiah 33, we are finally pointed to a time when they turn back to God.

Not as the one who is their great fountain of delight and joy of all good, but really to God as their last resort. And repentance is not a way of life for the people of Jerusalem.

It's a last gasp effort to avoid disaster. And yet, God humbly receives them. And one clue to the changing situation for the people of Jerusalem actually comes in verse 1 of verse 23.

Ah, it should be woe. Woe, you destroyer. You who have not been destroyed. You traitor. Whom none has betrayed.

When you have ceased to destroy, you will be destroyed. And when you have been finished betraying, you will be betrayed. If you read from Isaiah 28 onwards, up to this point, you'll have noticed that there were a number of markers along the way.

[3 : 39] The ESV really messes this part up. I can't understand why it doesn't use the word woe in verse 1 of Isaiah 33. We get six woes in these chapters.

But there's a difference because up to now, all the woes have been about God's people. They'd be focused on Judah and Jerusalem. The people of God have been running away from God.

And God has said through the prophet Isaiah, woe to you. But this one is different. Because in chapter 1, verse 1, it's addressed to the enemy of God. To Assyria. The one who's been destroying Judah is going to be destroyed itself.

The one who's betrayed Judah will be betrayed itself. And so the tables have turned. And now the woe is not on God's people, but on his enemies. And we want to ask, how can God act like that?

How can he accept people who come to him kicking and screaming, who come to him really as a last resort? And if that is true for the people of Jerusalem, it's true for you and I too.

[4 : 44] And so I want us to follow the lead of the passage and you to do four things. I want us to take the highway, the green cross code, isn't it? To stop and to look and to listen.

And then to listen again. To stop, to look and to listen. And if you look at the chapter, it seems to be addressed to an audience who needs to think about their standing with God.

It starts from the perspective of a people who've come to God as a last ditch effort for rescue. And they have found that God has humbly and gently received them.

So it tells us that God's attitude to overdo repentance, His attitude to overdo repentance is actually gracious renewal. His attitude to overdo repentance, when we come to him late, he is still gracious. Or we can put it differently. When God is all we have, we find that God is all we need. When God is all that we have, we find that God is all we need.

[5 : 52] So we need to learn this lesson. So first of all, let's look at the stop, verses 2-6. O Lord, be gracious to us. We wait for you.

Be our arm every morning. Our salvation in the time of trouble. As the tumultuous noise, peoples flee. When you lift yourself up, nations are scattered. And your spoil is gathered.

As the caterpillars gather. As locusts leap. It is left upon. The Lord is exalted, for He dwells on high. He will fill Zion, His glorious city, 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. Jerusalem in verse 2 basically says, Lord, please stop treating us as our sins deserve.

We've stopped trusting in others. Times have changed. Finally, the people of Jerusalem have stopped trying to rescue themselves. And finally, they heed Isaiah's preaching.

[6 : 52] And as we saw in chapter 30, where Isaiah said, Blessed are all those who wait on Him, who rely on Him. And finally, they're waiting for God. But like C.S. Lewis, they're not moving in this direction in the most eager of ways.

Jerusalem has been threatened, doesn't it, by the Assyrian Empire. But God said, You don't need to worry about that. I will protect you. For that isn't tangible enough for the people of Jerusalem.

Other rulers. That's not the way they see other nations doing international diplomacy. So they decide, We've got to do it another way. We will go to Egypt. And we will ask them to help us.

And they look to form an alliance with the Egyptians to the south. But in the end, Egypt lets them down. And the pressure from Assyria doesn't let up. So King Hezekiah, the king of Judah, decides, You know what I'll do?

I'll try and buy Assyria off. So we actually read in 2 Kings 18, He takes the money from the temple treasury. He strips down all the gold from the doors in the temple.

[7 : 55] And he hands it all over to the king of Assyria. To get him off his back. It's a pretty bad move, isn't it, when you think of it. Because not only does he treat God as a worthless ally.

But now they make God from his temple pay the bill. The bill for their disobedience and their disloyalty. Picture the people of Jerusalem. As they carry the chests of silver and gold through the gates of the city.

To the Assyrian outpost. To the command centre at a distance. And they think, finally, finally we've got some peace from Assyria. Finally the Assyrians, they will leave us alone.

Finally the siege will be over. And they watch waiting for the foreign army to pack up camp. To put its weapons away. To fold up the tents. But it doesn't happen.

Because the Assyrians won't go anywhere. It's a con job. It's a fix. And the Assyrians get the money. And they get the gold. And then they decide we're going to attack anyway.

[8 : 55] And Jerusalem suddenly realises we've given away all our money. We've given away all our gold. And we're no better off. We're in trouble. And they realise we've compromised ourselves.

We've got nothing out of the deal. And so they realise they've got nothing left but the grace of God. They've got nothing. Absolutely nothing. And so they're left with their tail between their legs.

And they go to God. And they can't come back to singing. Oh we will sing of your love forever. They don't come back like that with their arms in the air. Because that would be a lie.

It would be hypocritical. And they come back to God as their great backup plan. And they come back as the last resort. And yet God still receives them. That even if you.

Even if you this morning. Even if you have been going everywhere else. In life. Looking for your security. And your identity.

[9 : 55] And your worth. And your salvation. And now you realise. I'd be running to all those places. All my life. And they can't give me what I'm looking for. And they won't give me what I'm looking for.

And then you come back to God as your last resort. He says I'll take you. You realise you can't save yourself. You can't fix this.

And how gracious a God am I. So the people of Israel in verse 2. They plead with God to be gracious. We're going to stop trying to fix this ourselves. We can't fix it.

We're going to try trusting in you. We need you to be our strength. That's what he means in verse 2. Be our arm every morning. On a day to day basis. We see your might.

And all you need to do. Verse 2 Lord. Is to get up out of your chair. All you need to do. In verse 3 sorry. Is when you lift yourself out of your chair. Lord. The nations flee.

[10 : 53] We need you. We need you. Because you are the highly exalted Lord. You are the one who will establish people. With justice and righteousness. Now we know Lord.

That all we have is God. And God is all we need. That he is our stability. He is the one who will be our wisdom. And our salvation.

And our knowledge. So they say. All we need to value. All we need to treasure. Is the fear of the Lord. We're going to stop trusting in other things.

We're going to wait on you. But from that plea to the Lord. To be gracious. There's now a call. To the listener. And they're told in this call.

In verses 7 tonight. Behold their heroes cry in the street. Their Edwards of peace. Weep bitterly. The highways lie waste.

[11 : 52] 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. Bishan, Karno, shake off their leaves. To the end of verse 7. There's a second command. We're told to stop. And then we're told to look.

That's what behold means. Look. Look at the desolation. Look at what happens when you don't trust in God. You've got military leaders on one hand. You've got diplomatic envoys on the other. You've got the hawks and the dunks. So to speak. But they're on their wits end. They've seen their best laid plans come to nothing. They're in absolute ruin. They see that Judah has become a scorched earth.

A scorched earth. Under a serious fist. And it's there we're being told. Aren't we? Pay attention. Because what happens. When you live life without God.

[12 : 52] It brings desolation. Alan Duboton. Is a British author and a speaker. And he gave a TED talk. Called Atheism 2.0.

It's quite interesting to talk when you watch it. Because he admits that new atheism. Which is put forward by people like Richard Dawkins. And others. Is actually really unwise in its militancy. Against religion.

So Duboton proposes a new atheism. Atheism 2.0. And as he calls it that. He wants to recognize the positive aspects of religion.

And seek to learn from them. Here's what he says. Atheism 2.0 starts with a very simple premise. Of course there is no God. Now let's move on.

That's not the end of the story. That's the very beginning. I'm thinking of a constituency of people. Who say. I can't believe in any of this. I can't believe the doctrines. That they are right.

[13 : 52] But I really like Christmas carols. I really like the art of Matanga. I really like visiting old churches. I really like turning the pages of the Old Testament.

These are people who are attracted to the ritualistic side. The moralistic communal side of religion. But can't bear the doctrine. And Duboton goes on to stress. That atheists need to incorporate ritual. And community. Into their atheistic lives. And everything will be so much more rich. it gives me when you watch that there's something isn't there of rearranging the chairs on the Titanic about that because he's missing the whole point and yet it's easy to look at Jabotov and other atheists and poke holes in the business but you know the danger the danger is that some of us would actually live that way too even coming to IPC we never call ourselves atheists but perhaps there's certain aspects and areas of our lives where we are functional atheists we like the hymns we like even the

corporate confessions we like the ritual we like coming to the church we like the community but we really do it all without any reference or connection to the living God Jabotov and others at least have the intellectual integrity to say no we don't believe in God some of us would never say that but functionally that is where we're at that we're not really trusting God that we're not really holding on to him we're not really submitting to him in our lives and Isaiah says the consequence of that belief is desolation look where that road leads you look what's coming down the tracks this morning a life without God only brings desolation do you know that?

do you believe that? look at the midst of the desolation as the people of Jerusalem realise all they have to do is depend upon the grace of God and they change him look what happens in verse 10 now I will arise says the Lord now I will lift myself up now I will be exalted that when we admit our disgrace that when we admit our defeat that when we admit our brokenness and our disappointment with ourselves with how we've acted and how we've acted towards others that is actually when God delights to enter in he resists the proud but he can't keep away from the humble he's saying when you sink down to your lowest point God is saying now again somewhere now I can help you it's completely counter-cultural isn't it?

that God's prerequisite for rising to save us is our admission of failure and weakness God's prerequisite for raising himself is our admission and humbling of ourselves and lowering of ourselves that's not just how you become a Christian is it?

[17:09] that is how you continue to grow as a Christian that is the life of a Christian that is the life of a Christian church what is the besetting sin of Presbyterianism if I can talk about that if you don't know what that is we can talk about it later but what is the besetting sin of that?

it is pride God has been very kind to this congregation God has been very very kind to us as a denomination in the last few years and the danger is we think we've got it we've made it we are the people we must be thankful that pride is dangerous the way of a church that refuses to become proud and self-righteous and that is humble and repentant and utterly aware of its constant need for grace that we are fragile fragile fragile fragile God says you need to plunge your failures into my grace and then I'll raise you up now I will rise so we'll stop trusting in ourselves we're to look and thirdly in verses 13 to 14 we are to listen it's very obvious isn't it verse 13 here here you are far off like death and you are near and acknowledge my might that sinners in Zion are afraid trembling and seized the darkness who among us can dwell with the consuming fire who among us can dwell with everlasting burning now it's the Lord speaking and speaking he says

I want you to listen and he tells the whole world to listen can you see that verse 13 it's not a parochial message it's not just for Jerusalem it's not just for Presbyterians it's not just for Christians it's an appeal to every person on this planet to listen up and to acknowledge the power of the Lord God says listen do you see and hear the effect of my power on those who are in Zion they are shaking in their boots because they suddenly now understand who they're dealing with and the one who they are dealing with is a consuming fire and the God of the Bible is red hot holy God is a fire who will burn forever with consuming intensity and he says here is the one who every single person must be concerned about I want all of us to feel the weight of this God this morning he is a consuming fire the writer to the Hebrews picks up on it as he instructs us that we are to worship God how are we to worship God we are to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe why are we to worship God like that because he is the God of a consuming fire it's not an Old Testament God versus a New Testament God that is untrue this is the God the Bible presents from beginning to end and so the reaction of the sinners and the godless in Isaiah 33 is totally appropriate they quake in their boots because they suddenly understand who God is this God who you have come to worship today is the same God that they are fearful of because they say who can dwell with the one who is a consuming fire God gives us the answer in verses 15 and 16 and he says he who walks righteously and speaks uprightly who despises the gain of oppression 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 defence will be a fortress among the rocks his bread will be given him his water will be sure and not fail him who can dwell with the God who is a consuming fire that is who can be in God's presence even though they've got no right to be in God's presence

God says it is the one who does what is right in God's eyes it's the one who speaks what is right in God's ears it's the one who acts rightly to his neighbour those kind of people get to dwell with God on the heights those people can be in the presence of God be consumed and not be consumed and

God says listen to this because this leaves you and I in a terrible predicament in a terrible situation and it would have left the people of Jerusalem in a terrible situation because left to ourselves we are selfish beings like they were and left to ourselves I don't know about you but I say words which wound and hurt other people and left to ourselves we treat each other very harshly so the question is how can I how can you how can we ever dwell with the consuming fire with the God who is a consuming fire that's the fire so God says stop look and listen but then he says look again verse 17 your eyes will behold your eyes will behold the king and his beauty they will see a land that stretches far off your heart will muse on the tower where is he counted where is he weighed the timber where is he counted the towers you will see no more the insolent people the people of an obscure speech that you can't comprehend stammering in a tongue that you can't understand look at

[22 : 23] Zion behold Zion the city of our appointed feast your eyes will see Jerusalem an untroubled habitation an unmovable 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 bread rivers and streams where no galley no warship with oars can go no majestic ship can pass for the lord is our judge and the lord is our law giver and the lord is our king and he will save us your cords hand loose they cannot hold the mast frame in its place or keep the sail spread out then pray and spoil and abundance will be divided even the lame will take the prey no inhabitant will say I am sick the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity what are they told to look at they're told to look on the city of God on Zion to look on the future Zion to look at the future Jerusalem the future world which will be completely peaceful completely secure and it will be absolutely protected from every enemy it's another vision isn't it from Isaiah of that world that's to come that absolutely glorious world that world that you and I yearn for we say that is what we were built for the kind of world we're seduced into thinking that we can get on by get to by running to the Egypt of the world by running to money or a certain relationship or a certain job that will get me to that world but you see there is a reason why this sign is secure and safe it's because as they look at Zion they are told that they see a person look at verse 17 they see a king in his beauty and the security of this world and paradise all depends on this king in fact the mention of the king in verse 17 would seem to indicate he's the key to any of us being able to dwell in the presence of the consuming fire so the question is who is this king he's talking about and in verse 22 we're told the Lord Yahweh he is the judge the Lord given the king he is the one who will save us so we're told the Lord who is the king who is a consuming fire is going to save us from himself and how is he going to do that well Isaiah points us into the direction of his answer look at verse 10 now I will rise says the Lord now I will lift myself up now I will be exalted if you know the most famous chapter in Isaiah it's Isaiah chapter 53 and Isaiah uses the exact same language of verse 10 to speak of a particular person in Isaiah 52 verse 13 it says this see my servant will act wisely he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted here is Yahweh here is the Lord speaking of his servant his servant will be raised and lifted up and exalted and the question is well who is he well you'll get there in Isaiah 52 but it is God's servant where we're told he will suffer it is God's suffering servant and amazingly he's described in Isaiah 52 in this suffering servant who's also a king the king in all his beauty that we look on in Isaiah 33 and inquiring minds want to say how is this servant king the answer to our need how is the king in all his beauty going to enable me to live with this

God who's a consuming fire because otherwise I'm dead look at verse 24 and no inhabitant will say I am sick the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity the more literal word there is born he will take up our sins will be born ours in the sense of lifted up it's the same word as rest time and then we find that word again in Isaiah 53 the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 where God says I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils with the strong sounds like a king so he poured out his life unto death he was numbered with transgressions he bore the sin of many he made intercession for transgressions it is this servant king this servant king who will come and bear our sins here is the king in his beauty and in his majesty in holy fire and as we gaze upon the king in his beauty we see that he has nail marks on his hands and he has nail prints on his feet and his side is pierced from the sphere because you see it is only because the servant king poured out his life unto death on the cross that you and I can now dwell with the God who is a consumer of fire and the image of the servant king now bearing our sin well we know don't we it is rooted back in the book of Leviticus that on the day of the atonement of the high priest among other things he took into the holy place two male goats one goat he would kill the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat the

place of atonement for our sins but the priest would take the live goat he'd lay his hand on the goat he'd confess our sins over the goat and then he'd send it away right into the wilderness and he carried our guilt as far as the east is from the west as far as it could go he bore the sins of his people and every year the high priest did that every year he repeated that why?

well because a goat can't take our sin it's pointing you forward to the one who would be taken away outside the city wall to a green hill far away without a city wall because he's been taken outside as it were into the wilderness he dies in Canaan and the Lord Jesus is taken out of the city to bear our sins it's significant it's pointed to the one on the cross who'd bear our sin away as far as east is from the west so far as he removed his transgression from us and that is the only way that you and I can survive the consuming fire it's also the way that you and I can dwell in the consuming fire if I can put it on that it's a fire which won't burn up but a fire that gives us life and so the servant comes to die for us as such that the Zion of the king becomes the dwelling place of his people the invitation this morning is to put all your sins on the suffering king so that you and I this morning even if we are coming to him as a last resort even if you're here this morning and you think

I don't know where to turn I might as well go to church if you're here as a last resort God welcomes you he welcomes you he welcomes you to the place where one day all of us will one day say I am not tired I am not ill I won't have a cold wouldn't it be amazing if it's verse 24 doesn't that drive you nuts about London how are you busy how are you feeling tired we used to ban that in our house group but look at verse 24 and no inhabitant will say I am sick you'll never say I am tired in the new creation you'll never say I am too pretty whatever your burdens or sicknesses in that place he says to you you will not say those words anymore because our sins have been borne by Jesus the servant king in the film the iron lady it's about Margaret Thatcher the former power minister and in the film

Thatcher is asked by her doctor how do you feel she's at the end of her life at the end of how do you feel here's her reply people don't think anymore they feel it's very clever one of the problems of our age is that we are governed by people who care more about feelings than they do about thoughts and ideas the Bible wants you to feel does want you to feel but the Bible calls you to think and the danger for some of us and the danger for some of our friends is we just go straight to our feelings and Isaiah says I want you to think Isaiah says I want you to stop and I want you to listen and I want you to look and I want you to look again and I want you to process this because your eternity hangs on this the TED talk that I cited earlier TED's strapline is this it's ideas worth thinking about about watching about considering but this is the ultimate idea isn't it this is the idea that you've got to have an answer for

[31 : 46] CS Lewis did and you and I have to to think and to look and to listen over and over again and to realise that when God is all that we have God is all that we need when God is all that we have God is all we need because what we need is a servant king and we have him in the person of the Lord Jesus let's pray God