

From Failure to Faith

Isaiah 33

Good morning! Our passage today is Isaiah 33. Before we dive in, I'd like to share a story that helps set the stage for Isaiah's vision in this chapter. Back in 2007, I joined a group of college students on a mission trip to Egypt through our university. We spent a week in the heart of Cairo, sharing the gospel and praying as we walked the city streets. Once that first week wrapped up, we were supposed to travel south through the desert to spend time ministering to the Bedouin people before eventually boarding a train in Luxor to return to Cairo for our flight home.

At the start of our second week, we packed thirteen people into a twelve-passenger van and headed south. At the time, I was young and didn't fully grasp the sheer size of Egypt or the vastness of the Saharan Desert. What I thought would be a simple road trip turned into a thirteen-hour journey, shoulder to shoulder in a van without air conditioning, across a desert where June temperatures routinely soar between 105°F and 115°F. I had just a single liter of water, and I was absolutely miserable.

About halfway through what felt like a journey through the world's largest oven, our driver suddenly lit up with excitement and pulled the van off the side of the road. In the middle of the flattest terrain I had ever seen stood a black mountain that he insisted we climb. Despite our attempts to protest—likely lost in translation—we found ourselves heading up the mountain. My water was nearly gone, and the heat radiating off the black stone of the mountain made our sardine-packed van feel like a vacation in comparison.

After what felt like an eternity, we finally reached the summit. After snapping a few selfies to mark our accomplishment, I took a moment to take in the view. It was breathtaking. You could see for miles in every direction—so far that if not for the horizon and the curve of the earth, I imagined you might even glimpse Sudan or Libya. The harsh, barren land I had been creeping through suddenly revealed its quiet, stark beauty, with a single solitary road cutting through the vast expanse like a black ribbon. Isaiah 33 is like that mountaintop in the Saharan

Desert—but with a view far more stunning. This chapter is filled with visionary language, revealing what God’s people will witness, even stretching into the distant future.

By now, you should have a clear sense of the historical context of this section of Isaiah—the looming threat of Assyrian domination. Hezekiah and the people of Judah had lived under this threat for years, trying every possible means of escape. Finally, with no other options and after many failed attempts, they do what they should have done from the start: they turn to the Lord. They place their trust in Him and cry out for deliverance.

What we are about to see is the result of God standing to vindicate His glory and rescue His people. This visionary passage portrays the destruction of the wicked—both within Zion and among the foreign invaders. It stretches as far as the eye can see, from the future radiance of the King of Zion to the lands over which He will reign. At the farthest reaches of this mountaintop view, we glimpse a perfect government in Zion and the blessedness of her people.

That’s where we’re headed this morning, but it doesn’t begin there. It begins where it always begins: with God’s people turning to Him—not because He is their source of all good, but as a last resort. Repentance wasn’t their way of life; it was a desperate attempt to avert disaster. And yet, in His mercy, God receives them to Himself anyway.

The Assyrians are threatening invasion, and even though God has offered help, Hezekiah runs to Egypt for support—only to be rejected. So, desperate, he empties the temple treasure, going as far as to strip the gold from the doors of the temple, hoping to buy off the Assyrians. You can almost picture it, can’t you? The Assyrians have the city completely surrounded, their forces shoulder to shoulder on every hill. Egypt has failed to come through, so Hezekiah sends chest after chest of treasure to the Assyrian general. As they watch the riches from the Lord’s house being carried out, they likely think to themselves, *“Surely this will do it.”*

The Assyrians gladly accept the treasure, and for a brief moment, Hezekiah feels a flicker of hope. But instead of dismantling their siege engines, they advance on the city. Instead of retreating, they smile—now wealthier than ever—and continue their attack. And Hezekiah thinks to himself, “this is why you don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

As the Assyrians prepare for battle, Hezekiah and the people of Judah face a sobering reality: everything they’ve tried has failed—and, in fact, made things worse. The enemy is still

advancing, and now their coffers are empty. The only option left is to cry out to the Lord, pleading for His intervention. Turning to God has been a backup plan, a last-ditch effort to avoid disaster. And yet—He doesn't turn them away. He isn't offended that He wasn't their first choice. In His mercy, He receives them and stands to vindicate them.

Isaiah 33 is for people who haven't been trusting God. For those who, despite their best efforts, have made a wreck of their lives. It's for people who have treated God like a backup plan—placing Him on the back burner, and only reaching out when things have gone too far. It's for those who have been striving for self-salvation, only to realize they desperately need a Savior outside themselves.

Maybe that's you this morning. Maybe you've been going through the motions of church, but aren't actually relying on God for anything. Maybe you're here as a last-ditch effort, hoping something will change. Maybe this is your first time walking through church doors because your life feels like a mess and this seems like the only option left.

That's the beauty of this passage—that's the beauty of the gospel. God doesn't mind the mess. He isn't offended that He's your last option. By the end of this chapter, we will see that God is more than willing to meet us in the mess. He isn't deterred by the disproportion between our hesitant, foxhole repentance and His overflowing, boundless grace. He welcomes it—at great cost to Himself.

*Ah, you destroyer;
who yourself have not been destroyed,
you traitor;
whom none has betrayed! (VI)*

Assyria has been a wrecking ball up to this point—crushing nations, breaking promises, and getting away with it. But in verse one, Isaiah declares that this tyrant is doomed. Their days of treachery are numbered, and soon they will face the swift justice of the sovereign Lord.

Tim has rightly pointed out in prior passages that the word “Ah” is better translated as “woe.” Up to this point, Isaiah has directed these woes toward God's people in Judah. But here, the Lord turns His woe against the Assyrian enemy. The moment God's people repent, He shifts

His judgment away from them and toward their oppressors. Yes, they had considered God their King—but now, for the first time, they are beginning to live like it and treat Him as King. And Isaiah captures for us the sound of this newfound, genuine repentance:

O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you.

Be our arm every morning,

our salvation in the time of trouble. (V2)

The tone has shifted dramatically, hasn't it? This is what genuine repentance sounds like. This is what it looks like to finally trust in God: "*God, my only hope is You. You alone stand between me and disaster, and I need Your strength moment by moment. At all times—but especially now—I need You. Grant me faith to grasp Your boundless grace, and save me.*"

Verse 3 paints a striking picture: once God's people genuinely repent, they begin to look to Him with unwavering confidence. The Lord is no longer a distant thought or last resort—He is decisively over every threat, every enemy. Scattering the nations around them is effortless for Him: "*When You lift Yourself up, nations are scattered.*" The Assyrian power that once terrified them is now completely under God's command.

By verse 4, the people face their oppressors with boldness. The forces of evil that once brought death and destruction are exposed, stripped bare, and looted. And in verses 5 and 6, they return to the fundamental truth: all they truly need is the Lord Himself. They see that salvation and deliverance are not the result of human effort or treasure, but of a miracle—and through faith, that miracle is becoming theirs.

Behold, their heroes cry in the streets;

the envoys of peace weep bitterly.

The highways lie waste;

the traveler ceases.

Covenants are broken;

cities are despised;

there is no regard for man. (V7,8)

Desolation. Despair. This is the picture Isaiah paints of God's people as panic sets in. Seeking allies in Egypt has failed miserably. Peace negotiations, bribes—none of it works. Their enemy is at the gates. Self-salvation seems like a good idea—until you actually try it. Even under the best circumstances, no one has ever figured out how to truly live well apart from the Lord. And this brings us to verse 9: a refusal to trust God always stifles true repentance. When we cling to our own schemes, our hearts harden, and the only path to life—the mercy of God—remains out of reach. The first step in moving from failure to faith is finally placing your trust in God. The second step, is staring honestly at our own brokenness—seeing just how powerless we are apart from Him.

Lebanon. Sharon. Bashan. Carmel. Names of cities mentioned in verse 9 that evoke beauty, strength, and abundance. Mountains and plains flowing with promise. And yet—without God, they are as dry and lifeless as the desert. Understanding our brokenness means seeing this truth: even in the most lush valleys, even surrounded by all the pleasures and treasures the world can offer, we cannot truly taste their goodness apart from a relationship with the Lord. Without Him, the richest land is barren, the sweetest fruit turns to dust, and the strongest fortress crumbles. Only in His presence does life bloom, hope rise, and joy take root.

Yet it is precisely in our defeat, in our despair, in the weight of our disgrace—when we finally see the full depth of our depravity and brokenness—that the Lord steps in.

*Now I will arise," says the LORD,
"now I will lift myself up;
now I will be exalted. (V10)*

Church, hear this: the Lord is ready. He is willing. He tells us so in verse 10. When you are at your lowest... when you feel too far gone... that's when God says, "*Now we're getting somewhere. Now I can help you.*" But there's a condition—we have to get out of the way. When we stop striving on our own. When we stop trying to fix it by our own strength. When we finally

fall to our knees and cry out, “*Lord, save me!*”—that’s when He moves. That’s when His power breaks in. That’s when grace shows up in all its fullness.

You need to understand this: in God’s economy, failure and brokenness are not obstacles—they are essential. It is precisely in our weakness, in our inability, that God’s power shines most brightly. Never think you’ve come so far that you can handle life on your own. Never forget: your failures are God’s opportunity to move with unstoppable power.

Struggling to be the father and husband you long to be? Good. That’s a start. Recognize it. Own it. And then cry out to the Lord. Get out of the way and let Him, in His strength and through the power of the Holy Spirit, shape you into a godly husband who loves and serves his wife well. Let Him move through you to touch the hearts of your children and point them to the gospel. Your weakness is the stage for His glory.

Can’t seem to shake the sin that keeps dragging you down? You’ve tried everything—self-help books, memorizing Scripture, even going to church—but you’re still stuck, maybe even worse than before. That’s ok. Maybe now you’re beginning to see the truth: you cannot save yourself. Jesus didn’t come for the righteous, for those who had it all figured out. He came for the broken, the sinners, the messy and the dirty. He’s the great Physician, and He’s ready for you to make an appointment. All you have to do is cry out to Him. Maybe you feel like it’s the eleventh hour—that your repentance is too long overdue. That was the case for Judah, and yet God still rose to show His grace and mercy, vanquishing their enemies at the same time. It’s not too late. You are not beyond hope. Your sins and your mess are not greater than God’s grace. Let today be the day you stop striving in your own strength. Let this very moment—before the sermon is even over—be the moment you cry out to the Lord for salvation. Step one: trust Him. Step two: recognize your brokenness. Here’s the amazing truth—this honest assessment of your brokenness is a good thing. Recognize it for what it is, it’s the very place where God’s power can begin to transform your life. When I was a kid, I honestly thought quicksand would be a much bigger problem in life than it’s turned out to be. But I had a plan. Movies taught me exactly what to do—and what not to do—if I ever stumbled into it. According to those movies, it was only a matter of time. The key to surviving quicksand is simple: don’t struggle. The harder you fight in your own strength, the faster you sink. Instead, you have to stay still and let someone else pull

you out. Our brokenness works the same way. Step two is learning to stop fighting in our own strength and to let God lift us up. Compared to the infinite holiness of God, your life will always look messy, and you will always need His help. But that's where He wants you, ever dependent on Him.

Trusting in the Lord, daring to look honestly and deeply at our own brokenness feels as though, maybe for the first time, we're waking up from the nightmare of our own self-sufficiency. Judah has finally seen the futility of their own striving. Having cried out to the Lord for salvation, Isaiah unveils the glorious promise: peace that steadies the soul, freedom that cannot be taken, and the unmatched joy of belonging fully to Christ. When we trust Him, confront our brokenness honestly, and witness the Lord rising to save us, we see that our only true boast is in Christ Himself—this is the heart of verses 13–24—renewal.

However, as we'll see in a moment, the promise of peace, freedom, and joy soon gives way to a sobering conviction of sin. The very people who have cried out to the Lord and are celebrating their salvation now begin to confront themselves with alarm. This is part of God's renewing work in sanctification: He wounds our consciences so that we see our sin, even as He heals that same wound with His forgiveness. A vital part of our renewal is God unveiling the presence of Christ in all His glory and fullness. It is through this revelation that He leads us into deep and lasting peace and joy. Our sin must first be exposed, and yet, in that very exposure, God brings healing. Christ must capture our hearts, becoming beautiful to us in a way that overshadows everything else. When that happens, it no longer matters what the world may throw our way—we are secure, we are blessed, and we are rich beyond measure in Christ.

*The sinners in Zion are afraid;
trembling has seized the godless:
“Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire?
Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?” (V14)*

Most of the time, we fear the wrong things. We fear insecurity—losing a job, falling behind on bills. Some of us fear inadequacy or criticism. Others fear things that make no sense,

like spiders in the corner of the room or on the ceiling. For Judah, their fear was real and immediate: the Assyrian army at their doorstep. But Isaiah points out something deeper: we often blame the world for our problems and ask all the wrong questions. When we finally come face to face with the radiance of Christ, everything changes. We stop asking, “Why isn’t God helping me?” and begin asking the harder, humbling question: “Why should God care about a wretch like me at all?” Standing in the presence of God’s holiness makes all other fears seem trivial. Sinners before a holy God shouldn’t compute. And it’s precisely this recognition, this awe and trembling, that becomes a crucial step toward true sanctification and renewal.

We have to see our sin and brokenness for what it is. For true repentance and renewal to take place, we have to understand that our sin has put the crosshairs of God’s wrath and justice square on our chest. We deserve the full wrath of God, and apart from repentance and faith, we will face the just punishment for our sins. Without His saving intervention, we will be like the Assyrians—subject to His righteous judgment and destruction.

That’s the reality for all of us—we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But that’s when the beauty of the Gospel shines through. For those Isaiah describes—those who cry out to the Lord for salvation and turn to Him in repentance and faith—God’s grace rushes in. It’s not something we can earn—we could never merit God’s favor on our own. It is a gift we receive through faith.

But for those who place their trust in Him—those who see that their sin and brokenness rightly deserve God’s wrath and cry out to Him in repentance and faith—that wrath is no longer something to fear. On the cross, God poured out His righteous anger on Christ in our place, and in turn, He pours out Christ’s perfect righteousness upon us, covering us completely and freely. No longer are we covered by sin and shame; now we are covered by the blood of the Lamb and made pure. And what does Jesus say about the pure in heart? ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Matthew 5:8). This is the very connection that Isaiah highlights in verse seventeen.

*Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty;
they will see a land that stretches afar. (V17)*

Talk about a paradigm shift! At the start of this section, all Judah could see was the looming Assyrian threat and the hopelessness of their situation. But Isaiah tells us they are about to see something entirely new. The eyes of their hearts will be enlightened to behold the King of Kings in all His splendor and radiance. They will see themselves safely within the fortified city, under the very protection of the King Himself. The Assyrian threat, once terrifying, will now be viewed with a sense of detachment—as if to say, ‘Where are they now?’—because God’s power and presence have rendered them powerless.

Your heart will muse on the terror:

“Where is he who counted,

where is he who weighed the tribute?

Where is he who counted the towers?” (V18)

The Assyrian threat that once felt so imminent is now only a memory. The sin you once struggled with evaporates like a mist. The hurt and trauma of your life are annihilated by the radiance of Christ the King. When we see our sin, pain, and tears through the lens of the Gospel and the beauty of Christ, everything changes. As the light of Christ shines into our hearts and lives, the things that once caused alarm lose their power, and we begin to delight in God far more than in the threats that once pounded at our doors.

And here’s the incredible part: the Holy Spirit begins this work in us even now. As we behold the Gospel, the Spirit opens our hearts to see the glory of Christ. How much more in awe will we be when He returns and we see Him face to face?

Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts!

Your eyes will see Jerusalem,

an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent,

whose stakes will never be plucked up,

nor will any of its cords be broken. (V20)

Dwelling on the Gospel and the goodness of God it reveals allows us to live fully in the present, even amid life’s trials and whatever knocks on our door. In heaven, this reality—our enjoyment of God—will be fully realized and perfected. Yet even now, we can experience Him. Not perfectly, but our present enjoyment of God is sufficient to sustain us through life’s

challenges until that ultimate reality is fully realized. We have been transformed, are being transformed, and will be fully transformed. Those who trust in Christ can face every trial with boldness, for He is their King—and the King has already conquered death.

Want to know how Erika Kirk can endure the murder of her husband with such remarkable strength? Want to know how she could forgive her husband's killer just days after his murder? Because Christ is her King. She knows the bullet that ended her husband's life only delivered him safely into the arms of Jesus. She has been forgiven, so she can forgive. And her hope in Christ is far greater than her grief.. *'O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?'*

Jesus never promised that following Him would be easy. He never promised a life without heartache or pain. But He did promise that when those moments come—when the bullets fly, when suffering presses in—He will be enough. For those who believe, He Himself will be our strength. And He is inviting you to make that hope your own.

In verses 17-19 Isaiah paints a picture of the secure land. In verses 21-23 he's explaining why it is so safe. The King is creating broad rivers and streams—so vast that no enemy could possibly launch an attack. The contrast between land and sea highlights how completely our King cares for us and protects us as we find our delight in Him.

And here's the part I love about the picture Isaiah paints. In verse 23, the Church isn't described as a spotless warship, sleek and mighty for battle. Instead, it looks more like a broken wreck—cords dangling loose, a mast that can no longer stand on its own. And yet, this floating disaster wins the war and takes the spoils. Why? Because the Lord is our King. He fights for us, and He saves us.

Running the race and fighting the good fight sounds poetic, and I'm sure the apostle Paul intended it that way in part. But when I read passages like this morning's, I don't picture a Hollywood actor crossing the finish line with perfect hair and spotless clothes, ready for a photo shoot. I picture a ragged soldier—out of breath, dirty, and bleeding—who has barely made it out alive. For me, the race looks more like a battered ship barely afloat or a wounded soldier from *Saving Private Ryan*. Along the way I fall, I stumble, I get knocked down and even trampled. Yet at the end of the race, when I finally stand before the Lord, my hope is to hear Him say, *'Well*

done, good and faithful servant.’ The victory will be mine, not because of my strength, but because all along it was the King who fought for me, and the King who rescued and saved me, and it’s the King who picked me up when I fell and helped me limp across the finish line.

When that race comes to an end—and it will for all of us one day—we will stand before the Lord. In that moment, the crises of life on this earth will be behind us. The only crisis that will remain is our guilt before a holy God. But for those who dwell securely in the strong city, covered by the blood of the Lamb through repentance and faith, Isaiah tells us we won’t even question where we stand.

*And no inhabitant will say, “I am sick”;
the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity. (V24)*

For those who have been saved by Christ, the guilt of our sin was placed upon Him—borne on His shoulders and carried far away into the wilderness. But for those outside the city—for those who have not placed their trust in Christ, who have not grasped the depth of their brokenness, and who have not surrendered to Jesus as King and Lord—death will not free them from the crisis of guilt before a holy God. To stand before the Lord still bearing that guilt will be a weight too heavy to endure. And those found outside the gates of the King’s city will be swept away, destroyed with as much ease as the Lord simply rising from His throne.

But it is not too late. Like Judah, you can cry out to the Lord for salvation. Your imperfect repentance or last-ditch effort will not stop the King from rising to save all who call to Him. Anyone who calls out to the Lord, believing in their heart and confessing with their mouth that Jesus is Lord, will be saved. There is a startling, gracious acceptance in Christ just as you are—an acceptance that leads us to trust Him, recognize our brokenness, and be renewed by Him. These steps bring new life, and nothing can keep you from it—not even your foxhole, last-resort prayer.

I pray that you cry out for salvation this morning. I don’t care if this is your first time in church or if you’re a deacon only now realizing your need for Christ—cry out to Him, and He will save you. Come aboard the ship with us. We’re not perfect; we’re barely afloat, our mast is broken, yet we sail victorious because the King fights for us, has saved us, and will continue to

save us. We are secure in a strong city, protected by broad rivers. There is joy in resting safely in the city of the King.

Isaiah 33 reminds us that though the world is filled with oppressors and fleeting powers, God Himself rises to judge and to save. The destroyer will be destroyed, and the plunderer will be plundered, but those who wait upon the Lord will find Him to be a sure foundation, a refuge, and a king in His beauty. Zion's security does not rest in armies or strategies but in the Lord who dwells with His people and forgives their sins. The chapter closes with a vision of God's redeemed people dwelling in safety, healed and forgiven, never again to be overcome. Our hope, then, is not in our strength but in the grace of the God who reigns, who judges with righteousness, and who saves to the uttermost all who call upon Him. Let's pray.

