

“Be Gracious, O Lord, Our Exalted King”

Isaiah 33

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*¹ Ah, you destroyer,
who yourself have not been destroyed,
you traitor,
whom none has betrayed!*

*When you have ceased to destroy,
you will be destroyed;
and when you have finished betraying,
they will betray you.*

*² O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you.
Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble.*

*³ At the tumultuous noise peoples flee;
when you lift yourself up, nations are scattered,
⁴ and your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers;
as locusts leap, it is leapt upon.*

*⁵ The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,
⁶ and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure.*

*⁷ Behold, their heroes cry in the streets;
the envoys of peace weep bitterly.*

*⁸ The highways lie waste;
the traveler ceases.*

*Covenants are broken;
cities are despised;
there is no regard for man.*

*⁹ The land mourns and languishes;
Lebanon is confounded and withers away;*

Sharon is like a desert,
and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves.

¹⁰ “Now I will arise,” says the LORD,
“now I will lift myself up;
now I will be exalted.

¹¹ You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble;
your breath is a fire that will consume you.

¹² And the peoples will be as if burned to lime,
like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire.”

¹³ Hear, you who are far off, what I have done;
and you who are near, acknowledge my might.

¹⁴ 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?”

¹⁵ He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly,
who despises the gain of oppressions,
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,

¹⁶ he will dwell on the heights;
his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks;
his bread will be given him; his water will be sure.

¹⁷ Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty;
they will see a land that stretches afar.

¹⁸ 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?”

¹⁹ You will see no more the insolent people,
the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend,
stammering in a tongue that you cannot understand.

²⁰ 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.*

*21 But there the LORD in majesty will be for us
a place of broad rivers and streams,
where no galley with oars can go,
nor majestic ship can pass.*

*22 For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver;
the LORD is our king; he will save us.*

*23 Your cords hang loose;
they cannot hold the mast firm in its place
or keep the sail spread out.*

*Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided;
even the lame will take the prey.*

*24 And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick";
the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.*

- Isaiah 33, ESV

Introduction: When We Finally Run Out of Options

"I do it myself!" Or, as my niece used to say, "Ah-bommer fass!" It's the cry of the heart of the independent-minded toddler, and sometimes it leads to disaster. I wonder if we ever outgrow this stubborn desire to figure it out and make it work without any help. So, often, as adults, we carry such anxiety that we need bottles of antacid or even prescription medication because we insist that we must figure it out, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, figure it out, and make it work.

Jesus says, "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) He says, "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:31-33, ESV)

God says in I Peter 5:6-7 – *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.”* (ESV)

But what do we do? We think we can handle it – the opposite of humbling ourselves. We think we’ll figure it out, and we lose sleep and even compromise our obedience in order to manage things our way rather than honestly and earnestly seeking the Lord and His kingdom.

By the time we come to Isaiah 33, Isaiah had watched Judah make a series of stupid mistakes and openly disobedient decisions in their efforts to make themselves secure. First, when Syria and Israel conspired against them, they sent treasure to Assyria to get them to attack Syria and get them off their back. Then, when these same Assyrians wiped out Syria and Israel and the Philistines and started coming after Judah, the king sent a treasure convoy to Egypt to hire their chariots and horses against the Assyrians. When the Egyptians failed to come to the rescue, the king of Judah sent an apology and a tribute to the Assyrian emperor, submitting to his overlordship in hopes that he would leave them alone. This didn’t work either, and the Assyrians started coming after Judah with intense ferocity.

Finally, when they were all out of options and had been backed into a corner, the people of Judah turned to the Lord and cried out to Him, as we read in verse 2 of Isaiah 33.

Woe to the Betrayer, v. 1

God is so unbelievably gracious and kind. Even though He had clearly and repeatedly warned them against every foolish step of self-salvation they tried, and they openly disobeyed Him, He now hears their cry and promises to come to their rescue. The opening verse of Isaiah 33 promises the destruction of the Assyrians, who have betrayed Judah –

*Ah, you destroyer,
 who yourself have not been destroyed,
 you traitor,
 whom none has betrayed!
 When you have ceased to destroy,
 you will be destroyed;
 and when you have finished betraying,
 they will betray you.*

Assyria had betrayed Judah by taking their tribute and attacking them anyway. Hezekiah was the king of Judah now, a righteous king who was leading reform in the land. And verse 2 tells us of the peoples' cry to the LORD -

The Prayer & Praises of God's People, vv. 2-6

² *O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you.*

*Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble.*

³ *At the tumultuous noise peoples flee;*

when you lift yourself up, nations are scattered,

⁴ *and your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers;
as locusts leap, it is leapt upon.*

⁵ *The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;*

he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,

⁶ *and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure.*

This prayer here is clearly a prayer for the people of Judah. Perhaps Isaiah wrote it for them, and Hezekiah ensured the people would pray it. We can't know for sure. What we can see here is that the people of God are finally turning from looking to the world for help and resources and are now looking to the LORD Himself.

We need to remember that the LORD alone is the all-sufficient, self-sufficient provider, protector, and Savior we need. We need Him to be gracious to us because we don't deserve His help. So often, He has commanded us to seek Him, but we have sought help from the world or from ourselves instead. We need Him to be gracious, for His grace is our only hope of salvation. If we come to God demanding our rights, our due, based on our own goodness, we have no hope of expecting anything from Him. But God delights in the prayers of His people when we come to Him not bargaining but pleading for grace, empty-handed, confessing both our need and our unworthiness.

*Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble.*

“Be our arm” is to be understood as “be our strength.” God is our strength every morning. He’s the One who wakes us up and gets us out of bed in the morning. Not only is He our strength every morning, but He is also our salvation in the time of trouble. Notice that He is first our strength every morning before He is our salvation in time of trouble. Depend on Him every day, not just on your bad days.

⁵ *The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,
⁶ and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure.*

One of the major themes of this chapter is the exaltation of the LORD – literally, the LORD rising up. Verse 3 says, “*when you lift yourself up, nations are scattered.*” Later, in verse 10, the LORD answers His people’s prayer –

*“Now I will arise,” says the Lord,
“now I will lift myself up;
now I will be exalted.*

This is a way of speaking of God arising and showing Himself to be God. When we sing about God being exalted, we mean that we want to see God recognized and honored as God. When God exalts Himself, when He rises up, or lifts Himself up, He acts in such a way as to demonstrate very clearly that He is God.

In the people’s prayer, they know that when God is exalted, He will fill Zion with righteousness and justice and will be the stability of His people. When the LORD fills Zion with righteousness and justice, God’s people will receive “*abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure.*”

Now, in the immediate context of Hezekiah’s kingship and the Assyrian threat, the LORD would answer this prayer by arising and defeating the Assyrian army dramatically with a single angel in a single night. However, the exaltation of the LORD would reach its fullness in Jesus. Specifically, in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God was exalted, showing His saving power and establishing righteousness and justice for His people, bringing an abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge. The exalted Christ Jesus, risen from the

dead and seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high, is the anchor for our souls, the Rock of our salvation.

Salvation for God's people from our worst enemies of sin, Satan, death and eternal condemnation were all secured by Christ being lifted up on the cross and then rising again from the dead and ascending into heaven for us as the Captain of our Salvation. This was a victory far more decisive, costly, and glorious than the angel's slaughter of the Assyrian army.

The Exalted LORD's Fearful Judgment, vv. 7-12

In verses 7-12, God responds to His people's prayer. He sees the suffering and devastation of His people and acts decisively –

*7 Behold, their heroes cry in the streets;
the envoys of peace weep bitterly.*

*8 The highways lie waste;
the traveler ceases.*

*Covenants are broken;
cities are despised;
there is no regard for man.*

*9 The land mourns and languishes;
Lebanon is confounded and withers away;
Sharon is like a desert,
and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves.*

The LORD is seeing the devastation of the land brought about by the Assyrian invasion, and He is moved with compassion to act for His people. When Jesus came into the world, He saw the devastation brought about by sin. The people of God were lost as sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus was moved with compassion for them. Their appointed spiritual leaders were not profiting the people but instead were profiting off of them, not ministering to them but only interested in being served by them. Jesus came as a Great Physician to heal the sick, as the Servant-Savior to serve and rescue His people.

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

*11 You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble;
 your breath is a fire that will consume you.
 12 And the peoples will be as if burned to lime,
 like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire.”*

God arising brings judgment to the enemies and oppressors of God’s people. But for those praying and longing for God to arise, a better blessing comes.

Who Can Dwell with the Consuming Fire?, vv. 13-16

The intense holiness of God and His powerful judgment leads to a very good question:
 Who can dwell with the consuming fire?

*13 Hear, you who are far off, what I have done;
 and you who are near, acknowledge my might.
 14 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?”
 15 He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly,
 who despises the gain of oppressions,
 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,
 16 he will dwell on the heights;
 his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks;
 his bread will be given him; his water will be sure.*

Can you imagine what the people in Jerusalem thought when they woke up and saw 185,000 dead Assyrian soldiers on the hills surrounding Jerusalem? I’m sure many rejoiced greatly at the Lord’s deliverance of His people, but what about the unbelievers who lived in Jerusalem? What about those who never expected to see God act in such a powerful way?

Verse 14 is a prophecy of how they would respond to the Lord’s awesome display of His saving and judging power, trembling with fear as they ask, “*Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?*”

This is a very good question, for the holy, holy, holy God full of power and justice has every right and reason to judge His own people, too. All sin is abhorrent in the eyes of the Holy One of Israel, the LORD of Hosts. And if just one of His heavenly host could strike down the mightiest army in the world, who could stand before Him?

Verses 15-16 tell us that only a truly righteous man can dwell with God. Ultimately, Jesus alone is the truly Righteous Man, which is why this language is in the singular. This is a description of The Righteous Man, such as we find in several of the Psalms - Psalms 1, 15 and 24. Only by belonging to Jesus, so that His righteousness covers us and counts for us, can we live in the presence of the Holy God.

For those who are in Christ, a great promise is given in the last part of Isaiah 33 . . .

Your Eyes Will See, vv. 17-24

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

18 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?”*

*19 You will see no more the insolent people,
the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend,
stammering in a tongue that you cannot understand.*

*20 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.*

*21 But there the LORD in majesty will be for us
a place of broad rivers and streams,
where no galley with oars can go,
nor majestic ship can pass.*

*22 For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver;
the LORD is our king; he will save us.*

*23 Your cords hang loose;
they cannot hold the mast firm in its place*

*or keep the sail spread out.
 Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided;
 even the lame will take the prey.
 24 And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick";
 the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.*

"Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty" – The Righteous Man in verses 15-16 is the King of verse 17. The shift of the focus of the passage has now shifted to the far future from Isaiah's day. The description of the Righteous Man who can stand in the presence of the Holy God and Judge of All the Earth has shifted the focus from the Assyrian threat of Isaiah's day onto Christ the Redeemer-King. And now the promises of verses 17-24 are for those who belong to Jesus.

One day, all of our troubles will be over. For those who belong to Jesus, the trouble we face in this world is the only trouble we will ever know.

Not only will our eyes see the King in His beauty – and this alone is quite enough – but we will also see "a land that stretches far" and "Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent." In this land and this untroubled city, the LORD will be there in majesty as our place of eternal refreshing. And in that place, no inhabitant will ever be sick and all sins are forgiven and removed forever.

This is a beautiful and poetic image of the New Heavens and the New Earth, the Paradise of God where we will live forever. We're told that no galley with oars and no majestic ship can go there, but that we, though our mast cords are snapped and hang useless, will be brought there safely by the Lord. It doesn't matter if you're strong or weak. It only matters if the LORD is your salvation.

Revelation 21:1-7 paints the same picture for us with different words:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

- Revelation 21:1-7, ESV

That's where we all need to be in the end. And you can't get yourself there. You can't do it. It's unreachable by any human means. Only the Exalted Lord of Hosts, only the Righteous and Beautiful Redeemer-King can bring us there. And we will see Him there. And we will be home and satisfied in Him forever. IF we're trusting Him to take us there in the end, we need to trust Him to take us through every trial that lies on the path between today and that day, too.