

Isaiah 22 - Untimely Celebrations

A translation and sermon by Nate Wilson for Christ the Redeemer Church 17 Dec 2006

Burden of the valley of vision.

What's with you now -

that you have gone up, all of you, to the housetops,
(2) shout-filled city of tumult -
exultant town?

Your slain

are not sword-slain

nor are they dying from battle.

(3) All your leaders have fled together; without the bow they were captured.

All of you who were found were captured together, from afar they scurried.

(4) Therefore I said:

"Look away from me;

let me be bitter with tears;

do not urge me to be comforted

over the destruction of the daughter of my people."

(5) For the Lord Jehovah of Hosts has a day

of tumult

and trampling

and confusion

in the valley of vision,

a battering down of walls

and a cry to the mountain.

(6) And Elam carried a quiver with chariot of men and horses,

and Kir uncovered the shield.

(7) Then it will come to pass that the choicest of your valleys are full of chariots,

and the cavalry sets up en force in the direction of the gate.

(8) So He has uncovered the veil of Judah.

But In that day

y'all looked to the armory of the House of the Forest,

(9) and y'all saw the breaches of the city of David, for they were many.

So y'all collected the waters of the lower pool,

(10) and y'all counted the houses of Jerusalem, then y'all broke down the houses to fortify the wall.

(11) and y'all made a reservoir between the walls for the water of the old pool.

But y'all did not look to Him who made her, or see Him who formed her from long ago.

(12) Yet in that day the Lord Jehovah of Hosts called for:

tears

and for mourning,

and for baldness

and for wearing sackcloth;

(13) but look:

joy

and gladness,

killing an ox

and slaughtering a lamb,

eating meat

and drinking wine.

"To eat and to drink, for tomorrow we die!"

(14) So Jehovah of Hosts has revealed in my ears:

"[I'll be damned] if this iniquity shall be atoned for y'all until y'all die," says the Lord Jehovah of Hosts.

(15) Thus says the Lord Jehovah of Hosts,

"Go to this aide, proceed upon Shebna, who is over the household:

(16) 'What belongs to you here?

And who belongs to you here,

that you have cut out here a tomb for yourself?

(He is cutting out his tomb on the height; carving a dwelling for himself in the rock!)

(17) 'Look, Jehovah will throw you a man's throw!

- He will grab you firmly,
 (18) He will spin you around and around -
 a spinning ball - into a land that's wide on both hands.
 There you shall die,
 and there the chariots of your glory will be a shame of your master's house.'
- (19) 'Also I will drive you from your office,
 and from your station He will pull you down!'
- (20) 'And it will come to pass in that day that
 I will call to my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah,
 (21) and I will clothe him with your robe,
 and with your belt I will gird him,
 and I will give from your rulership into his hand.
 And he shall become a father to the inhabitant of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.
- (22) And I will give the key of the house of David upon his shoulder,
 And he shall open, and none shall shut;
 and he shall shut, and none shall open.
- (23) And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place,
 and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house.
 (24) And they will hang on him the whole honor of his father's house,
 the offspring and the issue,
 every small vessel,
 from the bowls to all the pitchers.
- (25) In that day, declares Jehovah of Hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place
 will give way,
 and it will be cut down
 and it will be fallen,
 and the burden which was upon it will be cut off,
 for Jehovah has spoken."

Opening Illustration: Untimely Celebration in a Presidential Election

A Gallup poll in 1948 reported that only 36% of the population of the United States thought that President Harry Truman was doing a good job as President. The nation was discontented with high taxes, rising cost of living, labor strife, and the Cold War that was brought on with the end of World War II. The Republicans were sure that the 1948 elections would end the presidency of the Democrat, Truman. They began celebrating the victory of the Republican Candidate, Dewey, even before the election. The *New York Times* declared, "Thomas E. Dewey's Election as President is a Foregone Conclusion." Months before the election, *Life* ran a cover of a picture of Dewey with a caption that read, "The Next President of the United States." On election day, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* went to press with the headline, "Dewey Defeats Truman." Dewey's supporters crowded into the ballroom of New York's Hotel Roosevelt to celebrate. But they celebrated too soon. Truman had actually beaten Dewey by 114 electoral votes and more than two million popular votes. After the election, The *Washington Post* hung up a banner that stated, "Mr. President, we are ready to eat crow whenever you are ready to serve it!"

As we approach Christmas and all the celebrations that accompany it, I want to ask the question; "Are we celebrating appropriately, or are we going to eat crow?"

Jerusalem's Untimely Celebration

In Isaiah chapter 22, we have a couple of snapshots of the people of Jerusalem, which is called the "Valley of Vision" - although Jerusalem is on a hill, it is surrounded by higher hills and is full of valleys, so the physical designation of "valley" is not inappropriate, but figuratively and spiritually it was also a valley, a sinkhole of righteousness in which prophets were scoffed at and killed, a place where Godly vision was at a low ebb, even though God had sent prophet after prophet to them.

And what is the snapshot we see of this town of Jerusalem? Verses 1 and 2 picture the population partying on the rooftops! In the middle-East, it is common for people to have patios on their roofs where they relax and even have meals, but verse 2 talks of the city being full of shouting, blustering, and abandoned to merriment.

It reminds me of what I have seen in shopping malls close to the Christmas holidays. People rushing everywhere, Christmas carols blaring, a blaze of lights and sparkling decorations, people gorging themselves on rich food, greeting everyone with “Happy holidays!”

Is that right or wrong?

It’s quite all right! In Zephaniah 3:14 God actually commands, “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem,” – using some of the same verbs as are in Isaiah 22:2!

So celebrating is good, but it must be done under the right circumstances. God, through the prophet Isaiah, expresses indignance in chapter 22 against the people of Jerusalem for celebrating. Why? Because the inhabitants of Jerusalem are rejoicing at the wrong time and for the wrong reasons. The setting of this untimely celebration unfolds in verses 3-11:

The Setting of Jerusalem’s Celebration

We see early on in verse 2 that something is bad wrong because Isaiah abruptly switches from talking about celebrating and starts talking about “the slain.”

- The slain will be victims who are captured without weapons, not warriors who die in sword-fights
- The leaders in verse 3 will abandon their responsibility and try to sneak away
- Verse 4 predicts that the people will be destroyed
- It is the “day of the Lord,” as verse 5 says, a day of “tumult, trampling, and confusion”
- The walls of the city are about to be battered down by an army which is besieging the city of Jerusalem. The shouts of that army echo around the hills.
- V.6&7 The enemy is from the Medo-Persian tribes of Kir and Elam, and they are threatening the gates of Jerusalem with chariots and horsemen and shields ready for battle.
- V.8 The covering was removed – whether that was the fortified cities around Jerusalem that were taken first or whether, as the Septuagint translation says, that was the *gates* of Jerusalem, the city lay exposed to a great threat.

This was no time for revelry! This was a time for weeping and repenting before God and begging for salvation!

But were the people repenting and looking to God for help? Nope.

- Look at verse 8. Where were they looking for help? To the armory – to their weapons! I Kings 10:17 tells us that Kings Solomon had built a building out of cedars from Lebanon, with great tree-pillars supporting the roof, so it was called the House of the Forest, and he filled it with armor. That’s where the people’s attention was riveted. “How many guns do we have?”
- What was their next thought? Verse 9-11 tell us that they preoccupied themselves with fortifying the walls and gathering water to withstand a siege.
- God expresses His disappointment in verse 11 that instead of looking to Him who had established the city of Jerusalem (The word “it” is feminine in Hebrew, and I believe refers back to all the feminine nouns preceding it: “pool” “reservoir,” “wall” and “Jerusalem.”), they were looking to their own carnal weapons and worldly means to defend themselves apart from God’s help.

The appropriate response to the fearsome conditions of Jerusalem was to look to God and repent and beg for help. That's what it says in verse 12, God had called for tears and mourning. (Shaving and wearing sackcloth were signs of mourning like we might wear black for a funeral in our time.)

Isaiah had it right; this was a time to mourn. We already saw in chapter 20 verse 2 that he was wearing sackcloth, and here in chapter 22 verse 4 Isaiah weeps disconsolately.

There is a time for tears, and there are many things to mourn over right now in the present day:

- We live in an age where so many people are walking by sight instead of by faith.
- We live among a people who live for the pleasure of the moment rather than for eternity.
- The leaders of many of our nation's churches have fled from their posts theologically as they have abandoned the gospel. Evangelical pastors of two of the largest churches in Colorado where I used to live have left their pastorates literally in the last 2 months because they chose to pursue homosexual relationships.
- As humanism overruns the thinking of our culture, we are surrounded by pressure to secure ourselves by worldly means – money, power, insurance policies, commodities, more government – and Christians are buying into it so naively. Is this where we should look for our security?
- Entertainment has become the all-consuming, driving force in the lives of our people – to be titillated with the latest exciting experience offered by ever-more-sophisticated media. “Eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die!”

I am reminded of the hymn written by Timothy Dwight (son-in-law of Jonathan Edwards and sometime president of Yale) “I love Thy kingdom Lord,” where he says of the church “For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend; to her my cares and toils be given till toils and cares shall end.” When was the last time you wept over the state of the world and the church?

Coming back to Isaiah, we see that in the face of all that was wrong, the Jews in the city of Jerusalem were partying! Isaiah recaps the untimely celebration of his people in verse 13 which he had begun in verses 1 and 2. Now that we have seen the setting inbetween verses 2 and 13, the weight of the inappropriateness of their celebration is clear. Now you see why God reacted so violently in verse 14 with an oath to never forgive them.

Fulfillment

Now, how does this prophecy fit into history? There are two periods of history where this seems to fit, first is around Isaiah's time under the reign of King Hezekiah just before 700 BC (Isa 36, 2 Chron. 32:3-5, 2 Kings 20:20).

- They were threatened by the Assyrian army,
- which indeed had Elamites and Kirites in it,
- and which indeed set up in front of the gates of Jerusalem to besiege it.
- Hezekiah did indeed fortify the walls of the city,
- and even developed an ingenious conduit system to redirect the lower spring of Gihon up into the city of Jerusalem to provide water for the inhabitants during a siege and to prevent the Assyrians from gaining easy access to water as they were laying siege.
- Shebna, who I will detailed later in this chapter, was an official in Hezekiah's court.

However, there are also things that don't fit with Hezekiah and the Assyrian threat, but rather with the final kings of Judah and the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in 586 BC:

- The atmosphere of faithlessness – not looking to God but rather partying is not part of the history of Hezekiah but rather of the final kings of Judah. Hezekiah was a man of faith who took wise precautions and ran to God for help when the Assyrians came. The later kings did not have that kind of faith.

- Hezekiah and the leaders of Jerusalem did not flee, but Jeremiah 39 tells us that King Zedekiah and his military leaders tried to secretly escape from Jerusalem after the Babylonian army breached the wall. The Babylonian army gave chase and captured Zedekiah at the plains of Jericho, put out his eyes, and carried him captive to Babylon.
- Lastly, the finality of the threat seems to match more the overthrow of Jerusalem by Babylon than the preservation of Jerusalem and destruction of the Assyrian army under Hezekiah.

So how do these things fit together? I suggest that they fit together like the prophecy of Jonah did with the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Jonah prophesied, “40 days and Nineveh will be overturned,” yet the city of Nineveh was not destroyed in 40 days, rather, it was destroyed by the Babylonians many years later. Likewise, I believe that this prophecy from Isaiah served as a warning to Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Isaiah’s time. A warning that if they did not look to God for their help when the Assyrian army threatened them, if they gave way to hopeless partying, God would judge them for that. Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem heeded Isaiah’s warning and God delivered them from the Assyrian army. But the later kings forgot God’s warnings, so they ended up getting the final fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy instead.

Here are 3 Applications for us this Christmas:

1. Celebrate as the right PERSON

I told you that I would get to the story of Shebna in the second half of this chapter. Verses 15-25 contain a dramatic snapshot of a government official named Shebna who is making elaborate provisions for himself when he has no business doing so.

Shebna, according to verse 15, is a high-ranking government official. Depending on which translation you look at, he is called treasurer, steward, minister, chamberlain, or vizier. He’s probably second-in-command only to the king. That’s why he is building himself a tomb right alongside the kings of Judah. (PASS AROUND PHOTOS OF TOMB) However, Shebna is the wrong person.

- Notice the question that God asks, “What belongs to you here? And who belongs to you here?” The question assumes that the answer will come back in the negative. No, Shebna doesn’t own any land around Jerusalem. No, Shebna doesn’t have any relatives in Jerusalem.
- Notice that Shebna’s father is never mentioned. Isaiah is the son of Amoz; Hezekiah is the son of Ahaz; Eliakim is the son of Hilkaiah, but Shebna? Nobody knows his lineage.
- Note also how God says to Shebna in verse 18 “the house of your master,” whereas in verse 23, when God speaks of Eliakim, he says “the house of his father.”
- In other words, Shebna is a foreigner.

Was there anything wrong with ruling Jerusalem or building a rock tomb? No, not at all. The Bible does not condemn Joseph of Arimathea, for instance, for being a council member and for having a rock tomb. It was appropriate for him, but not for Shebna. He had no more business ruling Jerusalem and building a king’s tomb for himself than my cat has any business living in my house. It is my house, my cat did not pay for it, my cat does not clean it, I do not want the cat in my house, and so whenever my cat sneaks in, I cast it out ignominiously.

And that’s what God did to Shebna. In the history section of Isaiah, chapters 36-37, we encounter Shebna again, but he is no longer over the royal household, instead Eliakim has that title.

Let me ask you, do you have any business celebrating Christmas? Or are you like Shebna, doing the right thing as the wrong person? When Jesus comes back are you going to say, “But Lord, I went to church, I sang Christmas carols, I gave good gifts to my family and friends, I celebrated Christmas – I even put a manger scene in my yard!” And will He say, “Depart from me, for I never knew you!”

Only those who have placed their trust in Jesus, believing that He is indeed God become man, who saved us from our sin by dying on the cross and taking upon Himself the punishment for our rebellion against God - only such people who have been reconciled to God have any business celebrating at Christmas. If you have not placed your faith in Jesus like that, now is not the time for celebration, rather it is the time for tears. It is time to bow before God and beg for mercy to be forgiven of your trespasses and ask Him to save you. Only then can you become the right person to celebrate Christmas.

2. Celebrate for the right REASON

We are not to celebrate in order to take our minds off our troubles like the Jews of Jerusalem were doing. We are not to “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” As Paul says in I Corinthians 15:32, that is the attitude of those who do not believe in the resurrection as we do. I’m not saying you should tear down all your Christmas lights and declare a fast on Christmas Day and be grinch. I’m just asking you to celebrate for the right reasons instead of the wrong ones!

The words used in verse 13 – “ox,” “Sheep,” “wine,” “eating,” “gladness” were all part of God’s command to His people in Deuteronomy 14:26 to celebrate the annual feast of booths. So there is an appropriate time for this kind of celebration.

1. In Deuteronomy 14, it says, “you shall eat there before Jehovah your God and rejoice, you and your household.”
2. Going back to Zephaniah, why did he command God’s people to shout and rejoice? Zephaniah 3:15 says because “The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.”
3. Isaiah also speaks of an appropriate time for rejoicing in chapter 61 verse 10 “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...”

What is the reason to celebrate that all these passages have in common? It is to exult in the presence of God because of His salvation!

The right reason to celebrate is because God is with us. We celebrate Christmas because Jesus was born as a man in order to save us. We celebrate because He did save us. Therefore, let us focus all of our celebrations around these facts.

For instance, the Christmas tree. There are different reasons why one might bring a tree into their home. We are told that the ancient Europeans did it because they worshiped trees. We are told that Martin Luther did it because he wanted to reproduce for his family a beautiful sight in God’s creation that he saw one night in the woods - starlight through the boughs of the trees. Wrong reason – right reason; same tree in the house!

I suspect most Americans put a tree in their house simply because it is tradition and everybody else does it. Is that a good reason? No! It’s up to you to decide whether or not you want to put a tree in your house, but if you do, do it for the right reasons! My parents told me, “We use an evergreen for the Christmas tree because it is a symbol of the eternal life God gives us – it’s leaves are always green, even in the Winter! We put lights in the tree to remind ourselves that Jesus is the light of the world. My parents then made ornaments for the tree that represented things we were thankful for – animals and things in creation, symbols of special events in our lives, and even food, and we hung them on the tree as memorials to thank God for His good gifts. We topped the tree with a star and put a crèche underneath to remind us of the Biblical story of Jesus’ birth. Nowadays my family uses plastic nativity figurines because we WANT our babies to play with them and think about the story of Jesus... but we don’t put the baby in the manger until Christmas Day!

The tree is just one example of focusing our Christmas celebration so that it is for all the right reasons, but I encourage you to think through every aspect of your celebration and organize it around the presence of God and His salvation.

3. Celebrate at the right TIME

Brothers and sisters, we should be people who, like the men of Issachar (I Chron. 12:32) “understand the times” and know what to do. In the midst of our holiday celebrations we need to be careful that we are not doing the right thing at the wrong time.

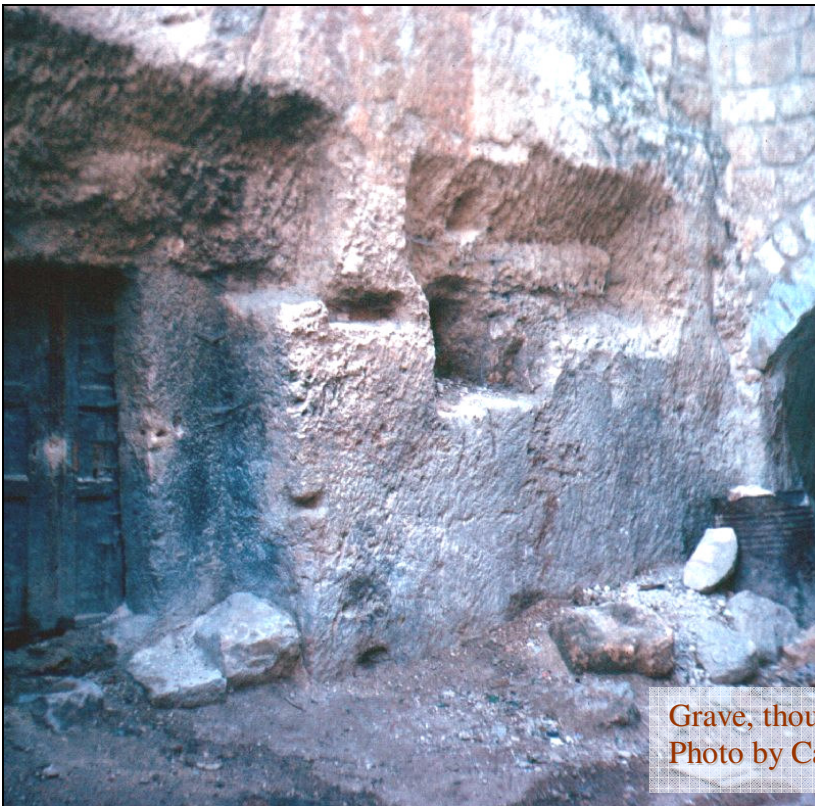
Remember the story of Mary and Martha and Jesus (at the end of Luke 10)? Jesus was in Martha’s home, so it was time to celebrate in Jesus’ presence. But Martha was not in Jesus’ presence, was she? She was so busy preparing food for the celebration that she was missing out on enjoying the presence of Christ in her home. Let us learn a lesson from Mary. Do not let the work of preparing for Christmas take you away from enjoying the presence of Christ in you and in your home. Take time to read the Bible, to sit quietly and just enjoy God’s presence, and pray.

Think about the timeliness of gift-giving and feasting and purposefully organize these parts of our celebration so that they do not detract from celebrating the first coming of Christ in His birth.

In closing, Paul’s words in 1Corinthians 5:8 are appropriate, “Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Let us celebrate Christmas as the right people, for the right reasons, and at the right time.



Silwan hill, where grave is located, as viewed from the temple mount.



Grave, thought to be Shebna's, hewn out of the rock.
Photo by Carl Rasmussen <http://www.holylandphotos.org>



Inscription from grave: (Photo by British Museum: <http://files.aomin.org/images/jpeg/Shebna.jpg>)
This is the tomb of xxxياهو, who is over the house. There is no silver or gold here, but ... his bones and the bones of his mistress with him. Cursed be the man who opens this.