

TCC Sunday 8th June 2014 – God - best tackler, best goal scorer – Isaiah 28

Title: “God – best tackler, best goal scorer”

Purpose: To use the Football World Cup 2014 as the backdrop for understanding the various ways in which God tackles the issues in our lives and also is able to truly score the best goals.

INTRODUCTION

Now, unless you are living in a gold fish bowl, I suspect that it will not have escaped your attention that we are very soon to launch into **FOOTBALL FRENZY TIME** with the **2014 WORLD CUP** just about to arrive on a screen near you.

This morning, it seems like **the football theme** (and you really don't need to know anything about football) **does seem to dovetail in rather well for our passage today** – which is Isaiah 28.

New Section – Isaiah 28-35

As we come to Chapter 28 of Isaiah, it is worth pointing out that we are here coming to a whole fresh section of this book. The section goes for **8 whole chapters** and takes us all the way up to the historical/narrative section from Chapters 36 thru to 39 (which itself forms the transition across to the 2nd whole major section of Isaiah from chapters 40-66).

And that is naturally a really sensible time to try and see what is coming up.

To try and answer the question:

Q. So what are we now into, in this new part of the whole?

- **One person** describes our new section as: “Human schemes & God's plan” (Barry Webb – BST)
- **Another** sees it as **“A REQUIEM** (that's typically a rather solemn piece, usually used at some service for the dead) so “A REQUIEM for God's people in Judah” (Word Biblical Commentary)
- Wiersbe titles it as: “Future shock & Future glory” (Wiersbe)
- But the one that maybe seemed simplest and perhaps best was “Woes & Blessings on Judah” (Collins Bible Companion)

Woes x6

And as you can see, right there in our first verse, is that opening word WOE.

This word comes up 6 times and kicks off chapters 28, 29, 30, 31 and 33 – so clearly it is a word that ties together, to some extent the material that we are going to be heading across for the next few weeks.

And this word WOE – **“HOH-EE”** in the Hebrew – is one that is important that we stop and look at for a moment.

Q. Why do we need to do that – after all surely we all know what WOE means? (It's kind of like – “You're all DOOMED – DOOMED I tell you!!!)

And frankly, it really looks like this is the right time to take a 6-week Sabbatical!!

51x in the OT

Well, back to our word for a moment.

In the OT it comes up 51 times and, like most words, it has a range of meanings, and so your translation might have translated it as: **ALAS** or **OH** or **AH**.

The word is what they call **AN INTERJECTION** and so it will sometimes be followed by an **EXCLAMATION MARK**.

50x in the Prophetic Books

What makes this word particularly interesting, and it is quite a commonly used word, is that in every case bar one, it turns up in the prophetic books (books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets).

And Isaiah uses this word much more often than anybody else – 21x in all.

Q. But why should we care?

Q. And – isn't it just bad news anyway?

Well – if all the 21x that Isaiah uses the word for WOE were like the 7 WOES that Jesus pronounces on the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, then I would be inclined to think that probably we should just skip on at this point to Isaiah 36 where the story part begins.

But actually, when we hit this interjection, it is God's way of taking a PERMANENT MARKER PEN and circling a section.

These are the places where God makes special appeal to His people because they are in the process of making a big mistake, or this is the place where the people have got their thinking all mixed up.

And hence these are the places where we have major LEARNING POINTS right under our noses.

So actually we should be a lot more positive about these sections than negative – and let me give you one curious example of where our INTERJECTION gets used – and that is Isaiah 55 and Verse 1 where we read:

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

One last question:

Q. The fact that Isaiah really tends to use the word a lot of times (especially in the first half of the book) – what does this tend to indicate (what's it suggesting to us)?

Well at least 2 things:

- ONE THING – is that God's is very keen, through His prophet Isaiah, to APPEAL to His people.

And we saw that very early on in the book – Isaiah 1v18 “Come let us reason together says the LORD...”

You see – just in case you don't really know it - God really cares for us – God takes many steps to let us know that we matter to Him and that He will not easily be chased away from us.

We have a God of initiative, we have a God who is in pursuit – **THOUGH** we do not have a God who will **FORCE**

HIMSELF upon us. We do not have a GOD who will let Himself be MOCKED.

- THE OTHER THING(as to why we come across this “WOE” word so many times) – is that just perhaps, we, His people, are classically HARD TO REACH.

Have you ever had that slightly frustrating feeling when someone has a mobile phones, but it seems that whenever you phone them, they never pick up? Or perhaps, you send them an urgent txt, and they come back to you 2 days later and say – “Oh, sorry, my phone was in my bag and I didn’t look at it until today”!

And so the this word is alerting us to the ALL TOO COMMON FACT – that we, His people, TEND TO BE “HARD OF HEARING”!!

And this aspect, I would suggest, comes across in Isaiah 28 where God uses no less than 3 approaches to get His message across to His “HEARING IMPAIRED” people.

Our Structure

So just so you know where we are going – and so the time-conscious amongst us can roughly calculate how long it is going to be before you can get your hands on the coffee and cookies, I am going to give you the 3 simple headings.

Before I do let me just check that you are still awake at this point:

Q. What will it indicate if some of you are looking **BOTH SAD & TIRED** next Sunday morning?

Or put that another way Q. What will it mean if you are looking both tired and slightly cheesed off?

Well – it just means that you stayed up next Saturday night to watch the World Cup opening game on BBC1 against Italy, which starts at 11pm our time, and that perhaps we are already wondering whether Roy Hodgson was the right choice for England!!

So just to help us get in the football spirit:

- Part 1 – Verses 1-13 – What I’m calling “The Indirect Ball”
- Part 2 – Verses 14-22 – “The Direct Pass” & finally
- Part 3 – Verses 23-29 – “The Dependable Set Piece”

(And just in case you don’t know anything about football, I will explain as we go along!!).

And in each of these 3 sections we are going to see **God as the EXPERT TACKLER** – tackling one by one each of His people’s supposed winning approaches!

So #1 then:

1] “The Indirect Ball” (Verses 1-13)

This first section names those that are being spoken about.

In **Verse 1** and **Verse 3** we have the same identifying phrase **“that wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards”**.

Q. Ephraim?

Q. Who or what is Ephraim, when they are about, you might ask?

Ephraim, was one of Joseph's first two sons. He became one of the twelve tribes of Israel and was in fact the most prominent, the chief tribe in the Northern Kingdom. And so sometimes, when Ephraim is mentioned in the OT, it is simply a way of referring to the whole of Israel, the whole of the Northern Kingdom.

And the reality was that there was very little love lost between the Southern Kingdom of Judah and their Northern brothers.

The capital city of the Southern Kingdom was Jerusalem, the city of David, and the capital city of the Northern Kingdom, of Ephraim, was Samaria.

Q. Indirect ball?

Q. Now why do I call this: "**An indirect ball**"?

Well simply because the primary focus of Isaiah's ministry is the people of the Southern Kingdom and this is one of God's ways of talking to them. It is an indirect method.

I'm sure that we've all done this before – tell a story about someone else when really the primary audience for the lesson, is the person we are talking to.

Our hope is that they will be better able to receive something because it is ***NOT*** being said to them **DIRECTLY**.

In a way:

- it is a kind of **safe way of hearing something**
- it is a seemingly **non-threatening way of being taught something**

It is very gracious of God that many times he teaches us thing first by indirect and gentle methods.

1. Their PRIDE & JOY

Q. So what is the LABEL that sums up these first 13 verses?

The single word: **P—R—I—D—E**.

Now I can imagine that you are thinking, well I'm not really that much affected by pride – actually it's pretty well the reverse – I suffer with a lot of self-esteem issues – sometimes I wish I could be a bit more proud, it just might help me!!

So just before you phase yourself out until we get to point #2 – let's suspend judgment and let's allow God's word to have space to do its own judging of us.

Q. What did their PRIDE look like?

Ok, so: Q. What did their PRIDE look like?

Well, the fact is, that they were very pleased with themselves.

And they had something that was very much their **PRIDE AND JOY** – it was their capital city - **SAMARIA**.

The city was rather nicely placed geographically – (and I suppose that was one reason why it was chosen to be the capital city of the Northern Kingdom) – Verse 1 tells us the details ***READ Verse 1 ***

So there it was, in pride of place, right at the head of a fertile valley.

To the eye, very pleasing, and with the city walls built around the Hill of Samaria, it would have actually had the physical appearance of a crown (that word wreath can be translated as crown).

And the message to them was very striking – God was going to come by way of one of His strong agents (in this case Assyria) and sweep their PRIDE AND JOY away!

In fact he uses the illustration (in Verse 4) of someone spotting an early ripe fig on a tree and simply saying to himself – “I’m in luck – the early bird gets the worm” and then grabbing it and swallowing it down. A true case of “NOW YOU SEE IT NOW YOU DON’T!”

2. Their ENTERTAINMENT & ESCAPE

Now:

- IF Samaria (their capital city), was their PRIDE & JOY
- THEN partying, was their ENTERTAINMENT & ESCAPE

Now very clearly the particular focus of their excess here was in the drinking department and you get a very consistent theme of DRUNKENNESS and people staggering from way too much WINE and BEER – and from Verse 8, we can clearly see that Isaiah is showing us what a NAUSEATING PICTURE it is.

Just adding to the disturbing nature of this is the fact that it is not just the working class peasants that are drinking away the pain and struggle of everyday life – but actually it is the leaders, the priests and the prophets that are leading the way.

Very up-to-date

Now this is a pretty up-to-date passage for our own day – we have the whole scourge of binge drinking fuelled by the very low price of alcohol in our supermarkets. And for those that have more money available, there are a variety of so-called “recreational drugs” that are commonly used.

But of course – that is out there in the world – it doesn’t affect us does it. We are nice Christians and we despise the things that THEY do!!

Q. Is it not the case that we too can be just as **befuddled** (as Verse 7 puts it) as those who engage in drugs and drunkenness?

Q. How is that?

Well think about why we turn to drink, perhaps to drugs.

Are we not seeking:

- to fill our feeling of emptiness
- to dull the sense of pain

As Christians it is the easiest thing in the world to drink in large quantities of mind-numbing, heart-dulling entertainment.

We have feelings of emptiness and we supply the lack through finding comfortable ways of escape.

We as Christian may not be downing pint after pint of cheap lager – BUT we may well be downing SEASON after pointless SEASON of this worldly drama or another.

Q. Do we ever stop to think what is going on at a Spiritual level?

Susanna Wesley

Susanna Wesley –(the mother of John and Charles Wesley) – was a very wise woman and she said to her son John: “Anything that increases the authority of the body over the mind is an evil thing.”

Q. Ever wondered why we seem to be so prone to running after one diversion after another, one entertainment after another?

Well, yes we live busy lives and so we do naturally crave some relaxation and recreation – BUT – that does not account for the extent to which we freely and habitually INDULGE ourselves.

When we set our sights upon some PRIDE & JOY and this becomes a MAIN PURSUIT – the inevitable reality is that this CAN NEVER fill up the GOD-SHAPED and GOD-SIZED whole that He has built in to every one of us.

As the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and verse 11 makes known to us “He has also set eternity in the hearts of men;...” – therefore anything man-made will never properly fill up this space, it will ALWAYS RATTLE AROUND INSIDE MAKING US FEEL EMPTY.

3. Their SOPHISTICATION & STUPIDITY

Their third tactic, that God now goes onto TACKLE is what I’m going to label: “Their SOPHISTICATION & STUPIDITY”.

See what their response is to the teaching of God’s true prophets – people like Isaiah and people like Amos (Amos was a contemporary of Isaiah whose ministry was specifically aimed at the Northern Kingdom).

Let me read Verses 9&10:

“Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?
For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there.”

They were mocking the likes of Isaiah and dissing his simple-sounding teaching. It wasn’t refined enough, it didn’t come with high-sounding notions, it wasn’t filled with the clever rhetorical or oratorical flourishes of the day AND THEREFORE it was to be discredited, despised and roundly dismissed.

Now you may wonder what the next bit means: “Do and do, do and do, rule on rule etc. etc.”.

Well in the Hebrew it is:

“tsav latsav tsav latsav – qav laqav qav laqav”

Which as you can tell is pretty meaningless sounding – and in fact people are not really certain whether we are actually meant to translate it as real words or whether they are just mimicking a kind of baby talk.

So I guess a pretty good equivalent for us might be responding to the Word of God preached, yes even here in THATCHAM COMMUNITY CHURCH week by week, along the lines of:

“OK we get it, we understand all this Bible talk: it’s always the same old stuff– **BLAH BLAH BLAH – YADA YADA YADA.**”

The apostle Paul had to tackle this one head on when he was at **Corinth**, a very sophisticated and cosmopolitan place where he says:

1 Corinthians 1 verses 18-25 “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”
Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?
For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.
Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.

The end result

The end result is that God is going to repay them using the very measure that they have been using – He will send them away in just a few years into exile in Assyria where they will not understand the language and it will sound to their ears as COMPLETE JIBBERISH!

Q. What about you – have you become too sophisticated for God?

Q. Are you no longer willing to accept the plain & straightforward message of God?

Maybe you have got to that worldly state of enlightenment that requires God’s message to be marketed to you and dressed up in worldly sounding terms before you would consider it to have any appeal, and any sort of claim.

Well we should be warned of treating God’s written and preached Word with contempt and neglect because we may reap what we have sown (and as Scripture teaches – God will not be mocked)!

Well, by way of these 3 TACKLES God has been speaking INDIRECTLY to His people in Judah by way of His handling of their brothers and sisters in Ephraim, in the North.

Now we come to #2 and what I’m calling:

2] “The Direct Pass” (Verses 14-22)

Therefore (Verse 14)

Now we know that we’re into a new section because it starts with that tell-tale word THEREFORE and so we are given

to understand that everything that God has been saying NOTIONALLY to those of the Northern Kingdom – He is really AIMING at those who are living in the South – in Judah.

Scoffing & Mocking

Now their reaction was one of scoffing and mocking – and that is all too easy to do.

This is a habitual temptation whenever we read Scripture to think that it only applies to someone else.

We very much nod in agreement with the Word of God and say “Oh, that’s so very true – there are just so many other people who do things like that etc. etc.”. We don’t tend to sense perhaps that we are being fingered by God.

God says to them Verse 22 “Now stop your mocking, or your chains will become heavier...”

Choosing the trendy – going with the “in crowd”

Q, So what were the people of Judah and Jerusalem doing?

Well they were boasting over the fact that they had taken steps to protect themselves and they felt that they were doing just fine –because they had entered into an alliance with another superpower – THE EGYPTIANS.

Isaiah restates their boasting inserting reality and truth into it:

Isaiah 28 verse 15 “You boast, “We have entered into a covenant with death, with the grave we have made an agreement. When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us, for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place.”

I guess the question that that poses to us is:

Q. What are we PINNING our hopes to right now? Maybe you think because you have a great job or you have multiple incomes or you have managed to get a house, that promotion – that you own your own business and your order books are bulging – that YOU HAVE EVERYTHING LAID UP FOR THE FUTURE – so relax all is well with the world BUT “all is *NOT* well with your soul”!!

Some priceless goals

Now I know that for many, the World Cup 2014 – will not really be anything that you are particularly looking forward to (unless you are Aunty Wendy – who I know will be glued to the set!)

However, one of the good sides of the World cup is that it does tend to produce some very good goals and if you watch the highlights on the news they will probably show you the best ones.

And here in Isaiah 28 - -there are at least two GREAT, even MAGNIFICENT GOALS SCORED BY GOD HIMSELF.

God is *not* just in the tackling business – He is there scoring HATRICKS – let me just mention 3 GOALS that come up in the chapter and I’ll not really be able to dwell on them or really expand them out.

GOAL #1

Verses 5&6 *READ*****

The true truth is that God – the LORD Almighty Himself is the real GLORIOUS CROWN – not Samaria for all its choice geographical situation – go there now and it’s just ruins.

GOAL #2

Verse 12 *READ*****

Yes God is where we get our real rest and security – as Jesus Himself confirmed – “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest...”

GOAL #3

Verse 16 *READ*****

All of these 3 promises, these wonderful goals – are made in reference to the remnant, to those who are believers and followers of God – as it says “the one who trusts will never be dismayed.”

The Sovereign LORD – speaking as only He can speak – tells us of a tested stone – a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation.

Q. Do you really have a sure and certain foundation to your lives?

Q. Do you have a foundation that will remain in dark and troubling days?

This passage is telling us the identity *not* of some nation or of some fool-proof method of living – it is speaking of a person – of the Jesus Himself – the Messiah.

Boil down the whole Bible and ultimately it is all about one person and sorry that person is *NOT* you!!

The Bible is about Jesus, it is His story, of how He comes into the world and becomes the Saviour of the World, of all who will put their full weight of trust in Him alone for everything.

Our last point

Well God is very committed to communicating and he has, thus far, used an indirect and now a direct way of tackling the necessary issues that are outstanding and which are prevailing with His people.

Now he finally turns to one other way of speaking – and this is what I’m calling:

3] “The Dependable Set Piece” (Verses 23-29)

Explain set piece

EXPLANATION

A couple of gracious encouragements

Isaiah 28 finishes off with a couple of gracious encouragements.

They are very cleverly delivered in disguise through the medium of some wisdom writings.

Verses 23-29 are somewhat akin to a parable concerning a farmer and the tried and tested methods that he uses at

the various stages of producing a crop.

The little illustrative story comes in two parts:

- In Part 1 – Verses 24&25 we learn about PLOUGHING and PLANTING and the simple lesson is that everyone knows that you don't go on afflicting the soil permanently – that stage of rough treatment of the ground is only temporary and preparatory.

This wisdom comes from God and so by way of parallel God all the more knows that and applies that to the way He deals with His people.

PAIN alone does not lead to the GAIN that God desires. In fact PAIN alone would simply be discouraging, depressing and plain detrimental.

- In Part 2 – Verses 27&28 – we see the PRODUCE or PROFIT end of the process and again God is the one who gives the farmer the wisdom to know which method will bring about the final END PRODUCT i.e. grain that is ground ready to make delicious bread.

And so we see that whether it is at the start of the process with the PLOUGHING and the PLANTING OR whether it is at the end of the process with the ROLLING and the GRINDING – God knows exactly what is needed in each case.

The INDIRECT METHOD

It is a fact – (and this chapter has illustrated that very nicely) – that on occasion God knows that an INDIRECT METHOD will be the right one with us – it will gain sufficient traction that we respond to the more gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit within us.

The DIRECT METHOD

At other times God, in His infinite wisdom, knows that we will only be likely to respond to a much more harsh and DIRECT METHOD approach.

The truth that this final section imparts to us is that:

- God is NEVER FICKLE
- His ways are NEVER HAPHAZARD

As Verse 29 informs us:

“All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.”

CONCLUSION

Q. So are you hearing God?

Q. Have you figured out how God is tackling you at the moment?

Well, if the answer is: "I simply haven't a clue" – just maybe you should watch a bit of the football – and every time you see an excellent tackle – be reminded that God, your God is the most proficient and expert TACKLER of all.

No-one – absolutely no-one gets by Him AND (just in case you were thinking it) God NEVER FOULS!

Moreover God is truly the best goal scorer – He alone scores the best goals – praise His holy name. AMEN