

Isaiah 30

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Preacher: Dick Lucas

- [0 : 0 0] Well, let's pray together. We pray, Father, that you will draw near to us as we draw near to you. We pray that your word may be what sticks in our minds and in our hearts today.
- So please be with me and all who hear your word. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, it's a great joy always to be back in the Tron.
- And I think probably it's right for me to say thank you. I was a visitor, as I always am, a visitor last week, and we were royally treated. It wasn't just that the weather was good, but the catering was good.
- I wouldn't really mention that first, don't I? It sounds as though we're greedy. I think ministers generally do like their food. Anyhow, it was marvelous. You looked after us so well.
- And, of course, it remains to pray for the many ministers who came and have gone back to their churches this morning. Well, now, I've got a tremendous verse for you today, and I hope you'll open your Bible at Isaiah 30 again.
- [1 : 1 1] I'm actually using the NIV. I haven't got on to the ESV yet. I'm a slightly conservative creature. It takes time for change to happen with me. As it happens, I slightly prefer the punchy way in which the NIV puts a number of things, as you will see as we go on.
- But really, there is very, very little difference. So, verse 15 of Isaiah 30. This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, said in the 8th century BC.
- This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says this very day. In repentance and rest is your salvation.
- In quietness and trust is your strength. But you would have none of it. I have to say, I rather wish there wasn't that sting in the tail.
- It's such a wonderful promise, isn't it? Those first two lines, and then the last line spoils it all. Well, let me tell you how I came to this particular promise of God just a month ago.
- [2 : 3 2] A friend of mine was doing, a minister was planning a series of sermons in his church on Isaiah. And he wrote to a number of ministers and friends and asked them to take part in it.
- And he asked them to choose their favorite verse in Isaiah. And to bring that with them. I was one of those who was invited.
- And I have to say, it put me on my mettle. I don't know what your favorite verse or passage in Isaiah would be. But there's so much treasure, you don't really know where to start.
- But I decided that, I went through Isaiah a number of times, I flicked over the pages, I looked at my favorite passages and realized other people might choose them too.
- But I decided that what I wanted was a verse that pinpointed the distinctive message of this great 8th century prophet. I didn't want to go just at random, something that I enjoyed.
- [3 : 3 9] I wanted something that Isaiah was saying over and over again to the people of Judah long, long ago. As it happened, when I came to preach, there was a baptism that morning.

And if you look at those first two lines again, they are wonderfully suitable for someone at the beginning of their life. And again, I have to say, I was sorry I had to read the sting in the tail.

You would have none of it. However, there it is in the Bible. A rather discordant note. But I suppose it does strike a note of reality, which we always need, that just as they were foolish, so can we be.

And by the way, Isaiah is very sarcastic about the people of those days. And it may be that I shall be sarcastic and say how foolish they were to have nothing with what God said.

But we, of course, are just as likely to be the same. So let's consider the actual historical situation when Isaiah first spoke this word.

[4 : 48] It's a long time ago in Little Judah, the southern kingdom, right towards the end of their existence and exile. You can read the story at the end of Two Kings.

It's about the dullest and dreariest part of the Old Testament that I know. So, these kings, Jahir has, Jahir, Kin, Jahir, Kim, I hope I know, I have to meet them again and read about them again.

They are such a dismal lot. Even our friend Ralph Davis, have you heard Ralph Davis here? I'm sure you have. Even he, in his commentaries, can't make those last chapters of Two Kings interesting.

I gather that Bob Farr may be writing a book on Two Kings, and so I challenge you, Bob, I see you up there, to make the last chapters of Two Kings interesting, if you can. Well, now remember that the northern kingdom of Israel is already finished.

It's been wiped out, or rather, the people have been deported to other lands. This, if my memory is right, is 722 B.C. They've been utterly defeated, they've been deported, and they've disappeared from history.

[6 : 04] Well, according to some cranks, they haven't. I've never heard of the British Israelites these days, but they believe that they're living now in the British Isles. So the northern border to Little Judah, if you can think of it in your mind, is exposed to the great Assyrian power, sitting there.

It's rather like Hitler in 1940, sitting on the French coast, and just imagine if he'd actually come instead of hesitating.

Well, Dad's army, of course, would have been no protection. Let me tell you, if you want to know how terrified you would have been, you only have today to go to the British Museum, where they have these great plaques of the Assyrians.

They were a powerful empire. They were hostile and cruel. You were likely to be skinned alive if they met you, and they didn't like you. There they are, in the northern border.

So what's to do for little Judah, with Jerusalem as the capital, a few towns around them, and no strength? Well, there are two possibilities in front of them, and only two.

[7 : 23] There's the prophet Isaiah. He's speaking boldly as usual. They can't shut him up. But no one listens to sermons, they say then, as they say that now.

They don't want to listen to him. So there's only one other possibility in front of them. So here we are, the northern border, Assyria above, and little Judah here.

There's only one possibility, and that's to go south to the Egyptians and make an alliance with them. And so Isaiah says to them, I warn you not to do that.

In that way, you will bring tragedy on yourselves, and in the end, permanent exile. But there was no contest. There seems to have been a group of diplomats in Jerusalem, telling the king, whoever it was, just at that very moment, that the only thing to do was to accept an alliance with Egypt, as, well, even then, they probably wouldn't be able to stand up to Assyria, but it was their last chance.

Now, I personally find some of the prophets quite difficult to understand, but I have to say that chapter 30 is particularly vivid and clear. So I'd like you to follow it with me.

[8 : 35] Will you open your Bible at it? And just follow with me the remarkably clear and vivid way in which it's described. First section is verses 1 to 5.

Verse 1, Woe to thee children, obstinate children, declares the Lord, to those who carry out plans that are not mine. Verse 2, Who go down to Egypt without consulting me, and who look for help to Pharaoh's protection.

And then especially verse 4, Though they have officials in Zohan, and their envoys have arrived in Hanis, everyone will be put to shame.

Not quite clear where those are. They're probably border towns here to the south, and so the diplomats from both sides have arrived to negotiate some kind of alliance.

Then look at section 2. This is quite amusing really. It's a pretty wild country. Through a land of hardship, lions and lionesses, adders and darting snakes, the envoys carry their riches on donkeys' backs, their treasures on the humps of camels.

[9 : 54] So the Judah diplomats, the diplomats from Jerusalem, are carrying enormous suitcases of money and cash.

No credit cards will be accepted. No shares. They want gold. And so they probably strip whatever they have in the temple and take it off to Egypt.

It's all very shameful and humiliating. But Egypt won't do it except for money. And then I like verse 7 in particular.

Look at verse 7. This is, I think, where the NIV comes into its own. To Egypt, whose help is what? Utterly useless. Therefore, I call her, Rahab, the do-nothing.

I think that's good, don't you? So although you pay enormous amount of cash to Egypt, there you call upon them for help, there you look to them in allowance, they're actually able to do nothing for you. And then look at verse, the next section, and I like, well, I don't like, but I think verse 9 and 10 and 11 is very powerful.

[11 : 10] Says, God, these are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the Lord's instruction. So this is right up to date, isn't it, in the world of our day.

They say to the preacher, see no more visions, and to the prophets, give us no more visions of what is right. We don't want to know what is right. Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions.

This is really our world, isn't it? Leave this way, get off our path, stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel. We don't want to listen.

Tell Isaiah to shut up. And then the final section, I think there's only one word really to follow there, verse 13, because they've rejected the message, then the one word that stands out in my version of 13 is that the high wall is collapsing, collapse, there'll be an utter collapse.

Yet despite all that, I glance down at verse 18, yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and I very nearly changed my verse and went on to that one, another lovely promise, which makes it all the more pathetic, doesn't it, that they're doing this, yet the Lord all the time longs to be gracious to them.

[12 : 28] In our stupidity, the Lord still longs to be gracious to us. So despite all that, despite the grace and mercy of God, the end was near.

Now my friends, we're told by the New Testament and the apostles that the Old Testament is written for our learning. So my question this morning is what do we learn from this? I was fortunate when I was working at this during the week to find on your bookstall the very latest book on Isaiah, written by David Jackman, quite short, but full of good things.

So hot from the press, I bought it. I looked up Isaiah 30 and I wondered if David Jackman would tell me what the answer was, what is the message I get from chapter 30, so that I can pass it on to the people who were at the Chan on Sunday morning.

Here are the words of David Jackman, not mine, he's much wiser than I am. What does this chapter teach us? Quote from David Jackman, the church is not to look to the world for support.

Obviously, Egypt here stands for the world from which the people of God have been rescued and redeemed. That's the country from which we've come, from which we've been brought out and want not to go back.

[13 : 56] So, I've taken David Jackman's sentence and I've just added one or two words to make it, I think, even more to the point for us. Quote, the church in times of crisis is not to look to the world for help and support.

I repeat it, the church in times of crisis, well, we're in a time of crisis as a nation, but in any kind of crisis, the church has, we're not to look to the world for help and support.

Now, how does this apply today? I mean, how in our own day, when the church faces different crises, do we turn to the world for help? I would be very pleased if one or two of you, having worked this out during the service today, would come to me when I'm having my cup of tea afterwards and tell me how you would apply this.

Of course, your job just as much as mine. How do you see, and some of you older ones, looking back, how has the church failed in this way? How has the church turned to the secular world to give its support and help in time of crisis?

Maybe the younger ones too. I'd be so pleased if someone would come to me and say, I didn't think much of your application, this is mine. All right? Well, now, to set the ball rolling, I'll take two easy applications.

[15 : 24] I think, as your guest, I'm allowed to go first, and I'm allowed to take the easy ones. That's my privilege as your guest this morning. So here, then, are two obvious applications that all can recognize from our experience.

First, money. In times of financial crisis for the church, I'm thinking of now, and not what you're reading about in your papers this weekend, in time of financial crisis for the church, where do we look for help?

I'll just have a glass of water in these very dry days. I came to Glasgow with an overcoat, a mack, and an umbrella. Perhaps I'm as foolish as the people from Judah.

Well, now, the living, I don't need to tell you this, you're well taught here at the Tron. The living church believes that God will supply their needs. We are to ask him. We are to ask him to give us what we need to pay our bills in the church and to do our work.

And we ourselves are to give sacrificially in order to answer our own prayers. So it is absolutely number one rule in all missionary work that every new church should be self-supporting.

[16 : 54] Let me, if I may, go back to my own memories of long ago, when I was very young, it was quite normal for the churches to appeal to the neighbourhood for funds.

And as I look back at that time, most people in the neighbourhood would be sympathetic to Christian things and want to support their local church. So it seems to me that in those days it was excusable for the churches to look to the world to help them to pay for their building and all their activities which were obviously aimed for the benefit of people outside.

But now, the outsider doesn't believe in the Christian faith, the outsider doesn't see any relevance in the Christian church, and sees no reason why they should support us. and I think that's widely felt here as it is back home.

In fact, now surely it's a shame and disgrace to ask the real unbeliever and the real non-church care to maintain our work.

Paul was super sensitive on this. Not only did he not ask the world to support him, but he was very, very careful not to ask very young churches to support him.

[18 : 15] In fact, he seems only to have trusted one or two Christian churches to support him and therefore worked their night at his tent making. As for churches that support their needs in the way of the world, are we not embarrassed by it?

Are we not embarrassed when we see churches supporting their work by bingo and lotteries? And the whole point of the lottery at any rate is that they're going to offer you something in order that you may give.

I have raffle tickets regularly through my front door and what it tells me as I open the lot of raffle tickets is you could win a superb car or a thousand pounds if you're second or a holiday in Majorca with a friend.

Now will you please give? In other words will you please give in order to get? When I became Rector of St. Helens in 1961 I was very sensitive about this.

I think, and I'll be very honest about it, I think I was over sensitive. The situation in the City of London then was that the churches in the City of London went cap in hand to the businesses around them and asked them for a contribution.

[19 : 36] And with the elders of St. Helens we decided right from the beginning that we would not do that. And especially that at our Tuesday lunch our service for business people we would not pass around the bag or make any mention of money at all.

I think personally we may have gone too far. You have the right to ask people to give to what they receive. But that was the decision we made. And I suppose in some ways it was a very costly one because hundreds of people started coming to those lunch hour services and they may have been surprised that no mention of money was given, made.

I said this at some talk I gave a little time ago and someone came up who was there at the time and reminded me that we did actually have a retiring collection. Someone had discovered in the safe of St.

Helens an enormous silver dish and they put it outside the door of the church on a chair so that these men as they came rushing out of the building back to their work would see this and perhaps be reminded to drop a coin into it.

Well that came to a very very quick end because somebody discovered that this silver plate was worth a fortune. And it now resides in the vault of some bank in London who has never been seen again.

[21 : 01] I feel sorry for the thief that was passing by and missed that one. Because anybody passing by could have picked up that silver plate and made a fortune for themselves.

So that was that. Well we may have overreacted but I think our attitude was right. We wanted to make it abundantly plain that we believed in God.

We wanted to say to these men and women in the city we don't want to come cap in hand to you because we have a God we can pray to. And he will support this work if this work is his work.

So we sought to make it his work and we sought therefore to ask God to pay our bills. And you know the strange thing that happens when you do that is that you not only are able to pay your own bills but you're able to pay the bills of other people as well.

I think of a church where I was preaching a few weeks ago and half their income is given to missionary work. That's a very high standard. Back to verse 7.

[22 : 06] I just love verse 7. That unprofitable nation Egypt whose help is utterly useless. And let me tell you that in terms of giving the city of London in the 1960s was utterly useless.

I remember that we took a memorial service for the chairman I think it was the standard chartered bank that was just outside the church and I got a letter some weeks afterwards with a check for 25 pounds.

Now 25 pounds was worth more in those days than today but then we wouldn't have been able to put a ladder up to our high ceiling to replace one or two of the lights for 25 pounds.

Here's one of the great banks of the city of London and they give you 25 pounds. In those early days Shell International was knocked down and the whole of that part of the city was covered with dust and our church was about two inches deep in dust.

So Mr. Wilman, the managing director of the company that was destroying all these buildings walked into St. Hallam's one day saw the dust everywhere and said Mr.

[23 : 13] Lucas we'll give you 100 pounds. Well I need harder to tell you the 100 pounds never turned up. So as far as the city of London was going even if we had asked them for money they would have been utterly useless as they have remained.

And the only churches that flourish are those that ask God to supply their need and seek therefore to put his glory first and to preach his gospel. First application in crisis times for money when we're doing God's work and we find that things are expensive and getting more expensive as they will all the days of the future where do we turn?

Do we turn to Egypt? To the world? Or to our rich and generous God? Second application I put down my notes second easy application the church's message the church's message.

Well my friends in this matter there has been a crisis as you know for well over a hundred years. It is in the last part of the reign of Queen Victoria that serious doubts of the Christian faith began to arise.

This was the time of Darwin and Huxley and many others. It was an age of doubt. And that has gone on it ever since. And faced with this growing doubt in the 20th century what did the great churches of the West do?

[24 : 46] The great denominations like the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. Well I think an alliance with the world is not exactly the right phrase. I'm going to use the word appeasement.

Do you remember Neville Chamberlain? Hitler says I'm going into Austria and the British government says alright well yes you do that but don't go any further. And then I'm going into Czechoslovakia.

Well yes we understand that and we won't do anything about it but you will understand you mustn't go any further. I hope as a country we've learned that appeasement never works.

I sometimes wonder. So the world said to the Church at the beginning of the 20th century we can't really you know accept Genesis and creation and we don't very much like your Old Testament.

Oh no no no no we quite understand that. but that doesn't stand in the way of Church membership you know. And then as the time went on many people began to say we believe your Jesus is a very great teacher but you know we can't swallow the virgin birth and the resurrection of the body.

[25 : 53] We believe that this is always any resurrection here he was just a spiritual it was just Jesus lived after death and we're not sure about that. and the Church backed off again.

No no we we understand your unbelief and we won't press these things upon you. Then the miracles of the Gospels began to go even the great William Barclay the Glasgow professor writing his Bible reading notes that have been read by thousands of Christian people in the British Isles.

When it comes to the miracles appeasement. they didn't really happen and we don't need to worry about them. And now in the times in which we live well the world is saying to us we don't really like you saying that Christ is unique in fact we won't have it because you've got to recognize there are many other religions that are just as important to the people who follow them and now we're told they don't like our morality either and we've got to back off otherwise there'll be trouble with the world.

each step of the way no trouble with the world if we step back a little with a reasonable spirit and make no demands on them that are impossible for them to accept and the result a very uneasy peace.

perhaps worst of all as I finish what the Church of England and I speak from experience I've been a minister of the Church of England now for nearly sixty years so I think I have the right to speak what is true of the Church of England seems to be true now of the Church of Scotland that we've actually got as far as verse 9, 10 and 11 look at them again as we look at our old denominations we hear the words of God through Isaiah these are rebellious people deceitful children children unwilling to listen to the Lord's instruction they say to the preachers we don't want any more of your talk give us no more visions of what is right we don't want to know please if you're going to preach tell us pleasant things and prophesy illusions that we can get to heaven despite the fact that we don't believe anything that you stand for leave this way get off the path stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel isn't that what your world is saying let's sing hymn 775 5