

Trust and Obey

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[0 : 00] Now you'll find our reading on page 590. Page 590, we're returning to the prophecy of Isaiah.

Now it's quite some time since we looked at that. I'm not expecting anyone to remember when we looked at chapter 29. So I've put on your seats this ladybird guide to Isaiah, which attempts to put it into manageable sections.

We're in section 3, chapters 28 to 39. You'll see at the bottom, Zion, Jerusalem is threatened and it's saved, but future exile is promised.

And just a quick word here, Isaiah prophesied for over 40 years during the reign of four kings, Jotham, Uzziah, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. But it's particularly Ahaz and Hezekiah who concern us. In the earlier parts of the book, Isaiah prophesied to the faithless, godless Ahaz and said, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all.

[1 : 12] And now in these chapters, we're into the reign of the good king Hezekiah, a man who had his faults, his failures, and his flaws, but nevertheless was a faithful and godly man.

And the background is the threat of Assyria, that gigantic superpower up on the Tigris there, ready to gobble up the little nations. And in these circumstances, Hezekiah's advisors are pressing him, trust in Egypt, go to the other superpower to protect us.

And this is probably in the early years of the king before his reforms had managed to take place. So that's the situation here as we read chapters 30 and 31.

Quite a long reading, but the chapters go together, and chapter 31 is fairly brief. So let's hear the word of the Lord. Isaiah chapter 30, page 590.

Ah, or perhaps better, woe, stubborn children, declares the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make a line, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin, who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my direction, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt.

[2 : 32] Therefore, shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation. For though his officials are at Zon and his envoys reach Haines, everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace.

An oracle on the beasts of the Negev. Through a land of trouble and anguish, from where come the lioness and the lion, the adder and the flying fiery serpent, they carry riches on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people that cannot profit them.

Egypt's help is worthless and empty. Therefore I have called her Rahab, who sits still. And now, go write it before them on a tablet, and describe it in a book, that may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

For they are rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord, who say to the seers, Do not see. And to the prophets, Do not prophesy to us what is right. Speak to us smooth things. Prophecy illusions. Leave the way. Turn aside from the path. Let us hear no more from the Holy One of Israel.

[3 : 57] Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, Because you despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and rely on them, therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly in an instant.

And its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel, that is smashed so ruthlessly, that among its fragments not a shard is found, for which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern.

For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, In returning and rest, you shall be saved, in quietness and in trust, shall be your strength.

But you are unwilling, and you said, No, we will flee upon horses. Therefore, you shall flee away, and said, We will ride upon swift steaks.

Therefore, your pursuers shall be swift. A thousand shall flee at the threat of one. At the threat of five, you shall flee, till you are left, like a flagstaff, a flagstaff, on the top of a mountain, like a signal, on a hill.

[5 : 11] Therefore, the Lord waits, to be gracious to you. And therefore, he exalts himself, to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice.

Blessed are all those, who wait for him. For a people shall dwell in Zion. In Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you, at the sound of your cry.

As soon as he hears it, he answers you. And although the Lord give you the bread of adversity, in the water of affliction, yet your teacher will not hide himself any more. But your eyes shall see your teachers, and your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, This is the way.

Walk in it. When you turn to the right, or when you turn to the left, then you will defile your carved idols, overlaid with silver, and your gold-plated metal images.

You will scatter them as unclean things. You will say to them, Be gone. And he will give rain for the seed, with which you will sow the ground, and bread the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous.

[6 : 17] In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, and the oxen and the donkeys that work ground will eat seasoned fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork.

And on every lofty mountain, and every high hill, there will be brooks running with water, in the day of great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

Behold, the name of the Lord comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke. His lips are full of fury, and his tongue is like a devouring fire.

His breath is like an overflowing stream that reaches up to the neck, to sift the nations with a sieve of destruction, and to place on the jaws of the people a bridle that leads astray.

You shall have a song, as in the night, when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute, to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the rock of Israel.

[7 : 34] And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard, and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger, and the flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones.

The Assyrians will be terror-stricken, the voice of the Lord, when he strikes with his rod, and every stroke of the appointed staff that the Lord lays on them will be to the sound of tambourines and lyres.

Battling with brandished arm, he will fight with them, for a burning place has long been prepared. Indeed, for the king, it is made ready, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance.

The breath of the Lord, like a stream of sulphur, kindles it. Woe to those who are down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, who trust in chariots, because they are many, and in horsemen, because they are very strong.

But do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or consult the Lord. And yet, he is wise and brings disaster. He does not call back his words, but will arise against the house of the evildoers, and against the helpers of those who work iniquity.

[8 : 50] The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together.

Thus the Lord said to me, as a lion, or a young lion, growls over his prey, and when a band of shepherds is called out against him, he is not terrified by their shouting, or daunted at their noise, so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion, and on its hill, like birds hovering, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem.

He will protect and deliver it. He will spare and rescue it. Turn to him from whom people have deeply revolted, O children of Israel.

For in that day, everyone shall cast away his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which your hands have simply made for you. And the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man, and a sword, not of man, shall devour him.

And he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall be put to forced labor. His rock shall pass away in terror, and his officers desert the standard in panic, declares the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

[10:22] Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Lord. Now, could I ask you, please, to have your Bibles open at page 590, and we'll pray and ask the Lord's help.

Father, indeed, we pray that the Spirit of God, source of the old prophetic fire, who spoke through your servants, the prophets, and spoke through your servant Isaiah in the 8th century of BC, will now use these same words to speak to us, because we believe that these were words not just for the prophets' time, but these were words for all time, for us upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

We pray that there will be a light that shines in a dark place until the day dawn and the morning star rises. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. So, Isaiah 30 and 31.

A prominent figure in 19th century Paris was a man called Charles Blondine. He was a trapeze artist, very famous, he attracted enormous crowds night after night, and in middle life he decided to emigrate to America, and one of his stunts there was to stretch a tightrope across the Niagara Falls and walk across it.

[12:07] That wasn't enough for Blondin, he pushed a wheelbarrow over it as well, and the story is told, although this is probably not true, that he once stopped in the middle of the tightrope and cooked an omelette on the wheelbarrow.

And as they say, if you believe that. Anyway, he used to invite people to sit in the wheelbarrow. He said, how many of you believe I can cross this safely?

Oh, yes, of course. Well, who is going to sit in the barrow? He had very, very few takers. Now, trusting in the Lord is very different from trusting in a trapeze artist, obviously.

Nevertheless, in all trust, in all faith, there is an element of risk. We don't know exactly what's going to happen.

Indeed, the father of the faithful himself, Abraham, we are told, went out in faith, not knowing where he was going. And this is what these chapters are about.

[13:14] It's about the idea of trust, the idea of faith, which dominates who do we trust and who deserves our trust.

That's why the theme tonight is trust and obey. I think it's very important, actually. Trust is not primarily a feeling. There will be many times we don't feel faithful.

There will many times we find it hard to trust. Indeed, I'd be very, very surprised if in this room and elsewhere this evening many people are finding it very, very hard to have faith, very, very hard to trust.

And that's what obedience is so important. Obedience means risking when we don't feel like it. Obedience means obeying even if we think it will do us harm.

And that is the situation here in these chapters. We're in great danger, a world of great turmoil. Who are we going to trust and whose word are we going to obey?

[14:23] So that's the theme for this evening, trust and obey. I want to ask two particular questions because there are two possibilities here, trust in Egypt or trust in the Lord.

So the first question is why is it wrong to trust in Egypt? And the second one is why is it right to trust in the Lord?

So we have to ask the question, who or what is Egypt? Now at the time obviously, as I said, it's a military state. No longer it had the enormous power it had had many centuries before, but it was still a very, very formidable power.

And Hezekiah's counselors were saying, trust in Egypt, because Egypt will protect us from Assyria. Assyria, the great superpowers on the Tigris, capital Nineveh, which is actually on the site of the modern town of Mosul, which you've heard about a great deal in the news about the Islamic state, and so on.

Anyway, that makes sense. We're faced with a great bully. Let's bring a bigger bully. If the playground bully is going to attack you, let's get a bigger bully to attack him.

[15 : 44] Now, Egypt here is what the New Testament calls the world. John says, do not love the world. Do not trust in the world.

Paul, at the end of his life, laments that Demas has forsaken him because he loved the world. Now, we must be clear of what this means.

What is the world? Now, in my youth, this was seen purely in external terms, and some of you would have been brought up this way as well, concerned with what we ate and drank, concerned with leisure time, concerned with whether we engaged in worldly activities.

Sport was not to be countenance, theatre, music, all the kind of things that so enriched life were frowned on, and they were called the world. Now, of course, it's true, any of these can be a temptation, anything can be a temptation and take us away from the Lord, but we must avoid that kind of fanaticism, otherwise, our faith will simply depend on externals, which can be seen and which can be touched.

The world, sometimes called Egypt, sometimes called Babylon, sometimes called Sodom, is the anti-God spirit that finds its whole meaning, its whole purpose in the present day, in what can be seen, what can be touched, what can be tasted.

[17 : 18] That's the situation then. Now, sometimes when you're trying to work out what something is, it's quite a good idea to decide what it's not, because that helps to be more precise.

Why is it wrong to trust Egypt? Now, we must avoid fanaticism. God can and often does do wonderful things, but God more normally works through means, and to say we're going to trust in the Lord doesn't mean, for example, if you have money to buy food, that you expect manna from heaven.

That's not going to happen. If you are ill, it doesn't mean you don't have to go and see a doctor. It doesn't mean, as I've heard some people say, you shouldn't take out insurance policies, because that's not trusting in God, that's trusting in Egypt.

The point is, you can see all these things as good provision for God, for our lives on earth. Oh, of course, if we idolize them, if we see them as things on which you must depend, then they become wrong.

The story is told, doubtlessly apocryphal, of a man who was drowning. And he is a Christian man, he prayed to the Lord, the Lord would save him.

[18 : 42] That moment, a strong swimmer passed and offered to help him. Oh, no, no, no, no, I don't need you, the Lord will provide. Then a boat passed, same response, the Lord will provide.

No doubt he thought I can't trust in Egypt. The inevitable happened, he was drowned. When he met the Lord, the apocryphal story goes, he says to the Lord, why didn't you rescue me from drowning? And the Lord said, I tried three times and you wouldn't accept the help. So, trusting in Egypt is not being fanatical and turning aside the gifts that God sends us.

So, what is trusting in Egypt and why is it so wrong? Well, you see, first of all, trusting in Egypt means a denial that God has saved us.

Going back to Egypt is actually turning our back on our salvation, what C.S. Lewis called the pilgrim's regress, going back to the land that God took them out of.

[19 : 50] And in the book of Numbers particularly, we read these stories, the murmuring and the complaining stories. Let's go back to Egypt. Egypt was far more comfortable, Egypt was far more luxurious than this.

And so, let's go back. That was expressed in that, for those of you who were here this morning, we saw Psalm 95, and Psalm 95 is specifically about that.

today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Don't go back to Egypt. Don't go, don't deny that Jesus saves us.

You see, the Negev, verse 6, an oracle on the beast of the Negev, the barren land where the territory around the Dead Sea slopes down to the Sinai Peninsula.

What does it mean for us to go back to Egypt as the Israelites did? For them, it was literal. For us, it means essentially denying God's power to save and God's power to keep.

[20 : 56] Can God provide a table in the desert? It's equivalent to denying that. Now, some time ago, a notorious case of the minister in Edinburgh specifically denying that Christ died for our sins.

and not only saying that in his own church, but putting it on YouTube so that others could share that message. You see, the point is Christ died for our sins is a totally unambiguous phrase.

There are many difficult phrases in the Bible, that's not one of them. Christ died for our sins is the very essence, the very heart of our salvation. none of us would want to go along with that view. Aren't we often tempted to go back to Egypt ourselves? Look at chapter 31. Woe to those. Rely on horses, trust in chariots and in horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel. Now, chariots and horses in the Old Testament are symbols of power and of strength. Just as we looked at last Sunday morning in Deuteronomy, Moses says the king is not to build up horses and chariots, not to rely on these.

[22 : 29] When we decide, or when we imagine, that what we do for the Lord is more important than what he has done for us, when we rely on numbers, on buildings, on abilities, all of these God's gifts, then we are in danger of going back to Egypt.

God's gifts are gifts, given to us so that we can live effectively in this world, given to us so the church can be built up and God's people blessed.

But they become deadly if we trust in them. grace, because if we trust in these, we are in effect denying grace, are we not? We are saved by grace through faith.

I've often said it before, that while evangelicals insist that we are saved by grace, we believe, in fact, that we are sanctified by works.

Not that our works don't matter, of course, but these works are works of grace. They're not works that earn grace. That's the point. So that's the first thing then. To go back to Egypt, and why it's wrong to trust in Egypt, is because when we trust in Egypt, we deny our salvation.

[23 : 48] Secondly, it's wrong to trust in Egypt, because Egypt is ineffective. If you look back again at chapter 30, this mysterious little passage, as it seems, six to seven, the oracle on the beasts of the Negev, the Negev, that, say once again, that barn area south of the Dead Sea, the scene of many of Abraham's wanderings, and it's talking about sending envoys to Egypt.

Back in chapter 4, his officials are at Zohan, his envoys reach Haines. This is, Zohan is in the far north on the Nile Delta, and Haines in the far south, rather like John of Groves, the land's end. It was envoys going down to Egypt, trailing the length and breadth of Egypt, and a very unpleasant journey through a land of trouble and anguish, verse 6, with full of predatory beasts, and also Rehab, who sits still.

Now, this isn't Rehab of Jericho, it's a different spelling in Hebrew. This is Rehab, the dragon, Leviathan, as the book of Job calls him. This is now the toothless, ineffective dragon, and very often, say in the prophets, particularly in Ezekiel, Egypt is referred to as Rehab, the monster, a toothless, ineffective monster.

All this hard effort, all this long and painful journey through the Negev, and then from the north to the south of Egypt, to achieve nothing. Rehab, who sits still, Rehab, Rehab, who does nothing, ineffective.

[25 : 33] And when we try to use worldly methods to do God's work, that's what happens. I'm not talking about differences of style and techniques.

Over the generations, these always change as we try to reach the world, the people of our time. What I'm talking about is the kind of attitude that because the world is changing, the church has to change.

And we've seen so much of that. And the kind of absolute nonsense that's taught. Virtual church, we are told. People live on the internet now, so the church has to live on the internet as well.

You have it suggested you have virtual baptisms and virtual Lord's Supper. I have no idea how that could happen. I'm no computer buff. Perhaps someone would be able to simulate that kind of thing. You see, when we start talking that way, because the world has changed, the church must change as well, we are denying the spirit. That's why the passage begins, stubborn children who carry out a plan, but not mine, will make an alliance, but not of my spirit.

[26 : 50] Egypt is a denial of salvation. Egypt is ineffective, and thirdly, Egypt is temporary. Chapter 31, verse 3.

The Egyptians are man and not God. Their horses are flesh and not spirit. Now, flesh is not evil in the Bible.

Flesh is fallen, of course, and needs redemption. The point is, flesh is perishable. That is the point. spirit is life. So, even if there appears to be an immediate advantage in trusting Egypt, that advantage will disappear, because Egypt's help, if it does help, is only for this life.

The Egyptians are men, not God. Their horses are flesh, and not spirit. They are perishable. It's ultimately choosing death, rather than life.

It's ultimately choosing decay and disappearance, rather than flourishing. Now, I think this is something that we don't sufficiently grasp.

[28 : 05] It's easy to talk about Egypt. It's easy to talk, piously, oh, Egypt's the world. But, when we look at it more closely, it's a denial of the very heart of our salvation.

It's ineffective, and it's temporary. That's what we need to remember. So, why is it right then to trust in the Lord?

Well, of course, in one sense, that question answers itself, doesn't it? But we find it very, very difficult to trust in the Lord, don't we? It's very important to remember it's not about great faith.

It's about faith in a great God. Jesus talks about faith like a mustard seed. And, why is it right to trust in him? First of all, because we have a relationship with him.

My children, 30, verse 1, stubborn children. And then again, later on, in verse 9, for they are rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord.

[29 : 19] And that is at the very heart of the Exodus stories. And I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. We trust in God because of our relationship with him, our Father in heaven.

That's why we trust in him. Now, it's very important to look at verses 8 and following of chapter 30. one of the many places where Isaiah makes it clear he's not simply talking to his own day.

Verse 8, now go write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book that may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

You know, he's already said this back in chapter 8 verse 16, write this and preserve it, like what we're seeing this morning, this word which is passed down from generation to generation, this word which Paul said to Timothy, teach to faithful men who will be able to teach it to others.

Permanent record. The words he spoke in 8th century BC Jerusalem are for us in the last days.

You'll notice once again, and this was also in the passage in Deuteronomy this morning who say to the seers, do not see, and to the prophets, do not prophesy to us what is right.

[30 : 50] Leave the way, speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions. These people wanted a ministry which would have no impact on lifestyle, a ministry which you could simply enjoy, go away and see it wasn't a great sermon, a totally bogus view of reality, smooth things, illusions.

Because the one thing a false prophet will never tell anyone is that they need to change. A false prophet will say what you need is to develop your potential, you need to believe in yourself and so on.

A false prophet will never say, will never tell people to repent, will not preach repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

They'll say things that people want to hear. And that's a daily temptation for those who preach or bring the word of God, to say things that people want to hear.

It's much more pleasant after all, give yourself an easier life if you say things that people want to hear. Now, on the other hand, this does not mean that you recognize a true prophet because they're aggressive and brusque and always beating people with a stick.

[32 : 19] The truth itself is offensive. Grace is offensive. People want to contribute to their salvation.

People want to stand in the presence of God and basically say, I'm not as other people are. That is the problem, isn't it?

I find very early in my ministry that people prefer the preaching of judgment to the preaching of grace. The reason for that is very simple because they always apply judgment to somebody else.

Oh, I hope so-and-so was listening, or I wish he had been here to hear that. But grace, nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

And people want to say worthy am I rather than worthy is the lamb. And that's, so there is no need for personal offensiveness. The grace, the gospel will offend soon enough.

[33 : 25] And this word, the word is available, but we need to obey it. We have the privilege of God revealing himself to communities, to individuals, through his word.

So, we can have a relationship with him because he has given us his word and his spirit. Suppose we didn't have the Bible. How do you think after thousands of years the faith would have become, as it passed down the centuries more and more diluted, like Chinese whispers.

And that's why when people ignore the Bible, that they can say anything they want, anything they like. So, the Bible is the word of God, not just for the time, but for every generation.

Heaven and earth will pass away, said Jesus, but my words will not pass away. That's the first reason, because he is our father who loves us and has given us the way to live.

Secondly, because he is the life giver, the basic truth about God is that he is the creator. And that, I think, is the point of verses 23 and following.

[34 : 47] You give rain for the seed and bread, livestock will raise in large pastures, ultimately going back to the covenant with Noah, that as long as the earth remains, summer and winter, sowing and harvest, day and night will never cease.

A reminder that all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. And already here in verse 26, going far beyond his own time, far beyond our own time, to the glories of the new creation, which we'll look at in a few weeks, in chapters 34 and 35, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, the new creation, far more glorious than this.

Now, Paul, in Romans 1, speaks of the danger of worshipping the creation rather than the creator. It's easy to lapse into that. It's easy to lapse into a kind of new-agey idea of the earth itself being an object of worship.

And so many of the kings of Israel and Judah worshipped the starry host, and so on. But, the antidote to that is surely in these verses, 19 to 22, we hear and we obey.

We see and we walk in the light, as John said. And in verse, in verse 18, sorry, of chapter 30, the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.

[36 : 33] How is that going to happen? Glance back at verse 15. Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, in returning and rest you shall be saved.

Returning, of course, is repenting, coming back. And, trust, shall be in quietness and in trust, shall be your strength.

We're not ultimately saved by our activism. We're ultimately saved by the action of God in Christ. That's the point. So, we trust in him because he is our father.

We trust in him because he is the life giver. And, we trust in him finally because he is the judge to whom each of us will have to give account. He is the one who will have the last word.

See, the end of both chapters, chapter 30 and 31, speak of the destruction of Assyria. The immediate context, of course, is the destruction of the Assyrian army before Jerusalem.

[37 : 39] It's also the last day. In verse 33, for a burning place, has long been prepared indeed for the king. The king there, of course, is the king of Assyria, but he's also, of course, the king who is Satan and his legions.

The place prepared for the devil and his angels. And then again, in verse 8 of chapter 31, the Assyrians shall fall by a sword, but not of man.

It was the angel of the Lord who destroyed the Assyrians. And it points to the final judgment. Fire, the fire of God.

Now, what have we read before in Isaiah of the fire of God? Remember chapter 6, when Isaiah had his great vision of the God exalted in glory and before him stood the seraphim, the burning ones, and Isaiah felt his own sinfulness, woe is me.

How was that cured? One of the seraphs took a live coal from the altar and touched his lips. That fire that burned and destroyed also purified and cleansed.

[39 : 00] What was true of Isaiah will be true of the people of that day and the people of this day. If we come back to him in returning and in rest, you shall be saved.

In quietness and in trust shall be your strength. See, there really is no other way to trust the promises and to obey the commands.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we are so prone to go down to Egypt for help.

We are so prone to trust in our own abilities and we are so prone not to trust in your great power and in your great love.

Oh, help us day by day to return to you, the maker of our souls, our Father in heaven, the one who loves us, the one who sent his son to give himself for us and the one who sent his spirit to make that real in our hearts and lives.

[40 : 14] This is our prayer this evening, our Father. Amen.