

In Quietness and Trust

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of January 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled In Quietness and Trust and is from Isaiah chapter 30 verses 1 to 18.

Let us pray. Our God, we pray that you'll give us ears to hear your word.

Not only to hear, but to walk in its paths. For your sake we pray. Amen. There are lots of people and lots of things in our world in which we place our trust.

Inevitably and rightly so. Friends. Parents. Our spouse. Business partners. Church.

[1 : 17] The bank. Indeed, relationships are enhanced by trust. They grow through trust and mutual trust.

But what happens when that trust is let down? When that trust is failed? When the spouse lies or runs off or a parent even dies can often lead to a great sense of betrayal for a child or a spouse.

When the business partner cheats or the church fails. For some people when trust is betrayed and lost, then the bottom falls out of their life.

They become bitter, resentful. They feel hopeless. They close up. The cynic doesn't trust anybody or anything after that sort of experience.

The point is, I guess, that in the end, everyone or everything may fail our trust in it or them.

[2 : 18] And the exception is God. The only exception. Trust is a good thing. But when absolute trust is placed in something and that trust is lost, then in one sense we ought not to be too surprised.

Now, the people of God in the nation of Judah in the Old Testament were faced with this very dilemma about trust and where to place it. We're in the late 8th century BC.

The years leading up to the end of the century. Assyria is the mighty world power. And Judah is faced with the threat of that power from the north.

It's in an alliance with Assyria to try and give it some security and stability, but that's a fairly flimsy alliance and vulnerable. And so, in its desperation, Judah turns to Egypt, its southern neighbour, an erstwhile superpower of the world.

Their action in forming this alliance and turning to Egypt for help is stupid on two counts. It's stupid politically because Egypt is no longer a superpower.

[3 : 31] It's weak. It's no real threat to Assyria. It's as though a country today turns to Russia for help in the face of America.

Russia used to be a world superpower, but not anymore. Turning to Russia would be a stupid political move if you're seeking help that will counter, say, our current superpower of the United States.

But it's also, and more importantly, stupid because it involves a rejection of God and trust in God. It's for those two reasons, but the latter in particular, that Isaiah chides the people of Judah.

Their political strategy, at one level, may look a reasonable strategy, but it's something that brings upon it the judgment and wrath of God.

So, that's why Isaiah begins chapter 30 by saying, O rebellious children, children because these are the people, the nation that is in a relationship with God, as a father to children relationship.

[4 : 37] O rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, and the idea there is of zealously eager to carry out their plan, but not mine, not God's.

Who make an alliance, but against my will. Their plans are not God's plans. And their alliance with Egypt is against God's will.

And they ought to know that. It's not just that now God says it's against His will, but rather it's something they should have known for centuries. When God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt in Exodus, in Exodus 13, God said, You shall never come back here again.

And then later on repeated that through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 17. You shall never go down to Egypt again. And they ought to know it from experience as well, because one of their greatest king's greatest failures was having many wives, including a daughter of Pharaoh, which led him astray religiously, King Solomon, of course.

So they ought to have known that Egypt was taboo, forbidden ground for them to turn for help politically. Isaiah goes on to say in verse 2, that they have set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my counsel, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt.

[6 : 05] Surely mocking the Psalms, because these are people who have exchanged the vast shadow of the Almighty with the small shade of a Pharaoh of Egypt.

Well, as often, God lets sinful actions run their course. And that's what's going to happen here for the people of God in the nation of Judah.

You see, so often, sinful ways have within them the seeds of their own destruction. You practice sin and it will lead inexorably and inevitably towards some sort of destruction or judgment or punishment.

Sometimes God directly intervenes to bring that punishment, but very often the sin itself has within it the seeds of destruction. That's why in Romans 1, Paul says about the sinful ways of the people of God, handed them over to their sinful ways.

That is, to let their sinful ways run their course of destruction and judgment. And that also is going to be what happens here in Isaiah 30. Sin's chickens for Judah will come home to roost, as he goes on to say.

[7 : 16] In verse 3, the protection of Pharaoh shall become your shame and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt, your humiliation. Okay, you've chosen that path, now walk that path, but you'll find that it doesn't lead to glory and safety and security, it leads to shame and humiliation.

Because Egypt is nothing. As he goes on to say, already it seems that the envoys of Judah are on their way to Egypt.

That seems to be who are being spoken about in verse 4. For though his officials are at Zoan and his envoys reach Harnes, it seems to be talking about Judah's own envoys who've gone down to make the alliance.

That is, they've almost got there. They've got to the first cities beyond the desert, to the upper delt eastern part of Egypt, Zoan and Harness. That even though they've got there, everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but rather shame and disgrace.

Egypt cannot help. It's not strong enough politically to help, let alone the more significant religious reasons of this being a rejection of God himself.

[8 : 30] Verses 6 and 7 are putting the same thing in a poetic way, but it shows how starkly the nation has gone astray. An oracle concerning the animals of the Negev.

The Negev is the desert area south of Israel on the way down towards Egypt. It's the area through which the people would have come as they came out of Egypt under Moses 600 or more years preceding.

Through a land of trouble and distress, of lioness and roaring lion, of viper and flying serpent. That is, it's a dangerous way that they've gone.

But that just shows how keen they are to make an alliance with Egypt. They carry their riches on the backs of donkeys and their treasures on the humps of camels because they're buying Egypt's favour.

They're coming with all the wealth of the nation to try and get Egypt on side, but yet a futile exercise. For Egypt's help is worthless and empty.

[9 : 32] The sentence is very abrupt. The poetry of verse 6 is a bit more flowing. The sharpness of verse 7 jars. Yes, they've brought all their wealth down to Egypt, but Egypt is empty and worthless.

It shocks the listener into seeing just what a futile exercise this is, politically and spiritually. Therefore, I have called her mockingly, Rahab who sits still.

Rahab was one of the sea monsters and sometimes in Hebrew literature is applied mockingly to Egypt, like we use the bear for Russia and the eagle for America.

Rahab, the monster, is Egypt, but she's a monster who sits still, who literally does nothing, who cannot help. This is a waste of time.

They're mocked also because they're not going the easy way. The easy way is down the coast. It's flat. It's safe. It's a main highway. Why aren't they going that way?

[10 : 36] They're going the way that Israel came out of Egypt. What they're doing is a reverse exodus, in a sense. Rather than coming into the promised land and leaving the oppression of Egypt behind, they're now reversing their history.

They're rewinding the video of their history and they're heading back to Egypt, which can only lead to disaster and oppression. When people pursue folly and sin, usually they are deaf to reproach.

They don't want to hear that they're heading down the wrong road. None of us likes to hear that. And that's the case with ancient Judah. Isaiah's rebukes time and time again in this book meet deaf ears.

And that's what happens now in verse 8. Isaiah is told to write down his words, not only to speak them, but now to write them down because they will be a witness for future generations.

That is, by writing them down, he will make them, in effect, eat his words later on when God proves himself to be right. The people probably are mocking, saying, no, no, no, Egypt's going to help us.

[11 : 47] Okay, I'm going to write down my words. In fact, God instructs Isaiah to write down his words. And in time to come, God's word written by Isaiah will be able to stand against the sinful people who refuse to heed this word.

When Egypt fails, Isaiah will be able to bring out his scroll and tablet and say, here, I told you. God's word stands. So in verse 8, God says to Isaiah, go now, write it before them on a tablet so that they can actually see and verify these words and inscribe it in a book so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.

For they are rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord. That verse, those verses, ought to give us confidence in Scripture because it's tried and tested.

It has stood the test of God's word being fulfilled. That's why we have it. Presumably other prophets wrote down other words at the time, but when they weren't fulfilled, when God didn't do what that prophet might have said falsely, then those words would have been destroyed, thrown out, forgotten.

But the words we have in the Bible are tried and tested. They've stood the test of time and history. God has shown them to be his word. Therefore, we can have confidence in them.

[13 : 11] And moreover, confidence, of course, in the God who spoke them and wrote them initially because God keeps his word. God keeps his promise. And what he says here about Egypt and Judah and Assyria came to pass.

So we can have confidence not only in this word, but in the God whose word it is. Well, Isaiah is facing pressure.

He's facing pressure to speak smooth words, we're told in verse 10. Smooth things. Prophecy illusions.

Smooth things or smooth words are things that don't ruffle the feathers, that sort of like a pat on the back, that don't disturb, don't challenge, don't bring discomfort, don't bring obligation or rebuke.

Smooth words are words we all like to hear. The pat on the back. There, there, you're doing okay. Not ruffling any feathers. All of us like to hear smooth words.

[14 : 18] Isaiah's listeners wanted to hear smooth words, but they didn't get them from Isaiah. And so he's facing pressure. Whether it's official pressure from the king, the government, or whether it's just peer group pressure from the people by and large in the marketplace, we're not sure.

It may have even been a subtle pressure, not so much an overt, come on Isaiah, we want you to speak nice things, but just a clear encouragement, subtly to speak nice things, soft things.

People turn away when he speaks words that ruffle the feathers, but they come close, eagerly, when he speaks the words of hope. Maybe that's the sort of pressure that he's under.

These are people 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 about the Holy One of Israel. They don't want to have anything to do with a God who's holy, because a God who's holy is demanding, a God who's holy has obligations morally on his people.

[15 : 29] Come on, speak to us smooth things about a God who just pats us on the back, a God who's like a great big Father Christmas type figure, who always says that we've done well and do good.

Isaiah is not alone in facing that sort of pressure, is he? St. Paul told Timothy to expect the same sort of thing. The time is coming, he said, when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

Surely they are people who are seeking smooth words. But it's the same today, isn't it? You look around half our churches of any denomination and you find people itching for smooth words and sadly too often preachers who deliver it as well.

Today the pressures are many. The feel-good factors. People like to come to church to feel good. They don't want to hear something that's not smooth, that's going to ruffle them.

That's a subtle pressure that ministers face, I believe. There's the pressure to be politically correct, to not to speak out against some of the things our society thinks are okay.

[16 : 56] That again is a subtle pressure, but a keen one for many preachers of the Bible. We must be careful to make sure that our own sinful nature does not make us deaf to the rough words of God.

We ought to be careful to heed the whole word of God, the whole counsel of God, not picking and choosing the bits we like and thus forming a God in our own image who will never ruffle us, but rather being bold enough to accept all of God's word, ruffling or smooth.

And for me as a minister, I must be careful to preach it, to preach all the word, ruffling or smooth. It's interesting, a couple of years ago we had a sermon series on Amos, a very harsh prophet, if ever there is one.

And at the end of the series, many people almost breathed an audible sigh of relief that now we can go on to something smoother. Well, I shared their sympathy, but I'm not disappointed that we preached through Amos.

Well, Isaiah doesn't buckle under pressure. Notice what he says in verse 12. They've just said, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel. And Isaiah's very next words are, therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel.

[18 : 21] No, no, you don't want me to say the Holy One of Israel? There, I'll say the Holy One of Israel to you because that's what I've got to do. He is, God is the Holy One.

And these are His words and I must speak them. Because you reject His word, this word, Isaiah's word, which is God's word, because you put your trust in oppression, probably that is a reference to Egypt being the oppressor back in the early days of the Old Testament.

Because you put your trust in deceit, maybe that's talking about the secrecy and underhandedness of their own alliance with Egypt. One reason why these envoys may have been travelling through the desert is because they want to keep their mission secret.

They're not going to travel by the coastal road where people will pick up, hey, what's going on here? Israel's Judas sending their envoys down to Egypt. Therefore, because of all that, judgment comes in verse 13.

And two images are used. The first one's of a high wall, a wall that's meant to be secure, maybe even talking about the wall of Jerusalem that's meant to provide protection. The wall will come crashing down, tumbling down, and it will come suddenly, in an instant.

[19 : 39] You won't expect it. If you look carefully enough, you may see the bulge as the wall's beginning to become fragile, but of course sinful people don't look carefully, do they?

This wall will come tumbling down in an instant, suddenly, when you don't expect it. That's God's judgment. And then a second image is used in verse 14. Its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel.

You imagine an earthenware jar or urn or pot of some sort, and it smashes. I think it's an image used deliberately in the preceding chapter as I was chiding the people for thinking they were the potter and God was the clay.

Now he's making it clear by this image of judgment that the pot is the people. God is the potter, of course, and they are the clay pot that is about to get judged by God and smashed to smithereens.

So smashed that there won't even be a useful bit of pot left. A sherd is what it's called. Pot sherds are what things are, what archaeologists search for because they can put them together and remake the pots and often on pot sherds people would write things.

[20 : 49] They would become little scrap envelopes that we use. That's a broken pot. Well, what do you do with it? Not much. You write on it and use it as a letter or a shopping list or something.

But it's not even going to be good enough for that, not to scoop any water out or not to scoop the fire out too small. That's total destruction that is being pictured here in verse 14.

That's the judgment that God is bringing. That's what placing an alliance or trust in Egypt will bring for the nation of Israel. It will lead to destruction because when you refuse the way of faith in God then you end up on a road inevitably leading to destruction.

When we place our faith in something else other than God almost inevitably that thing will turn against us at some time.

It will let us down. Trust Egypt and you'll be overrun. Trust God and you'll stand firm.

[21 : 54] well as usual the Bible does not only rebuke wrong behaviour but it provides the positive alternative as well and verse 15 does that.

For thus said 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.

not alliance but reliance and not on Egypt but God. It's the same message in effect that was given way back in chapter 7 if you remember back that far to King Ahaz not to panic not to fear when he was inspecting the water supply as Assyria was threatening but rather to trust in God.

He refused a sign God through Isaiah gave him a sign the child that would be born Emmanuel. In effect it's the same message that's being said here. Trust God and nobody else.

In returning literally is repentance that is come back to God turn away from your sinful ways your lack of faith and turn back to God there you will find rest there you'll find salvation there you'll find hope there you'll find strength there you'll find God far greater than Egypt or Assyria.

[23 : 23] Maybe the returning is also alluding to the returning of the envoys bring them back. Don't let them stay and negotiate terms in Egypt return them bring them back but it's also got that deeper spiritual sense of repentance as well.

It's easy to misunderstand these words I think. It's easy to take a very passive view about faith here as though all we've got to do is sit down let go and let God as though quietness and rest is about putting your feet up on a Sunday afternoon and watching the cricket and God's going to do everything for you.

That's not what's being spoken about here. You see the action that it's chastising is an activist approach the one that seeks to take control of the situation the one that seeks to negotiate this alliance here to place our faith and trust here.

An activism that doesn't have God in the picture at all discounts his power and his promise. That's what it's attacking.

It's not saying that we should be idle but rather dependent upon God. That doesn't mean that faith is not active. It is active.

[24 : 37] If Israel was to exercise active faith here rather than its pursuit of Egypt it wouldn't just be sitting down and saying well let Assyria come God's going to protect us but rather it would be seeking to protect itself and build up its walls and defences trusting in God and not in Egypt or in itself for that matter.

Well sin is not only death it's also blind and despite this great offer of coming back to God and finding in him strength and salvation the people say no thanks.

Verse 16 is almost comic. You refused and said no we will flee upon horses. We don't want God we want a horse.

What a comparison to make. My kingdom for a horse is almost what they're saying. But the modern equivalent you see we think of horses as everyday things but of course they're talking about war horses and the modern equivalent would be the B-52s or the cruise missiles or something like that.

You see horses were of great benefit in warfare and probably it's saying that Israel doesn't have many and Egypt has many as we know from other places of the Old Testament.

[25 : 51] They're saying we're going to get the modern the best weapons it's folly. It's the same today isn't it so many weak nations in our world clamour and pay exorbitant prices for the best weapons they can get as though somehow that guarantees them eternal security.

It doesn't. It won't and can't. But that's what Judah was doing here. We ought to horse. The problem is that Assyria will have faster horses, swifter horses or stronger horses.

You think a horse is going to save you? Of course it's not going to save you. What a foolish choice they've made to go for a horse rather than God. To rely on something other than God is a recipe for failure.

So we'll flee upon horses. Yes you shall flee but we'll ride upon swift steeds therefore your pursuers shall be swift. That is swifter still than you. You won't get away. A thousand shall flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five you shall flee until you are left like a flag staff on the top of a mountain like a signal on a hill.

Probably it's talking about Jerusalem as though the whole nation will be ravaged. Jerusalem alone will stand and that won't be much consolation 701 BC when Assyria came.

[27 : 11] But God is patient therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you. You've refused the offer. Time and again you've refused his word.

Therefore God's got to wait to be gracious. He's not going to be gracious now. He's not going to show mercy now. He's going to wait. He's going to wait for judgment to pass. He's going to wait for your repentance but God will wait and he'll rise up to show mercy to you.

Stand on tiptoes is the image of showing mercy. He'll be keen to show mercy to you despite your sin. For the Lord is a God of justice. Jesus told a parable about this same God using some of this same imagery.

He spoke a parable about God who was also the parent of a rebellious child as verse one says and that parent, that father waited, waited for the return of his rebellious child and waited until the rebellious child came home, returned, repentant.

Yes, his sin caught up with him in a pigsty. His sin wreaked its own havoc life, just as Israel and Judas will hear, that repentance will come, return will come, and the father will be waiting for the rebellious child.

[28 : 47] That's what God's like. chapter began with a statement of woe, alas, in effect, alas to those who do not wait for God, who take matters into their own hands, formulate their own plans, but do not wait for God.

But now at the end of this section, verse 18 ends, blessed are all those who wait for him. The movement is from woe to those who do not wait for God, to blessed are those who wait for him, who wait for God to destroy Assyria, who wait for God to fulfil his promises, who wait for God's salvation, who wait for God's strength, who wait for God's mercy and compassion, because God won't be thwarted by human sin.

His promises and purposes will stand fast despite his people, because he will wait. Now we need to be careful here, because God doesn't wait forever.

The Bible and Isaiah make it clear that there will come a time when God's waiting, his patience will expire and be exhausted. For us this means that we've been given time to return and repent, and that is a great mercy that we have in this life, and one we ought not to abuse.

But there comes a day when God's patience is exhausted, when his waiting stops, and his final judgment comes. We must not presume upon that patience.

[30 : 22] This is the time, now is the time, as it was then for Isaiah's hearers, to return and repent. God is our strength and our refuge.

God is a very present help in time of trouble, and therefore we will not fear. Be still, he said, and know that I am God.

Amen.