

The Lord is Our King

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on January the 17th 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Lord is our King and is from Isaiah chapter 33 verses 1 to 24.

Let's pray that God will open his word to us that we may understand it but more than that also to keep it and obey it. Almighty God we pray that you'll give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to respond with faith and repentance to your word through your prophet Isaiah.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. One of the problems of this life I think is that so many of the good things about life are dangerous.

Our resources are dangerous things. By our resources I mean things like our abilities, our cleverness, our gifts, our wealth, our ingenuity, our ideas, our strength and so on.

[1 : 32] All the things that are good about us or that are strengths in us or which we have resources that are strong to tap into are in some sense dangers for us because so often they hinder us from trusting in God.

For example, if you've always got enough money to buy all the food you need, then in one sense that becomes a hindrance to trusting God for your daily bread.

We take it for granted. We don't even consider God or we worry about his coals or Safeway. Or if you're a person who's got enough ideas or contacts or networks or resources to always solve the problems that you face in life, then it's a hindrance often to trusting in God for his answers or his protection or his care or his provision.

If you've got a bit of a gift of a gab or can speak eloquently, then it can be a great hindrance if you're a preacher because it's easy to rely on your own resources rather than to trust in God.

You see, our strengths or resources, which are good things in themselves, can be a hindrance to our trusting in God. So whatever you're rich at, whether it's a wealth or experience in a job or networking with people or rich in family life or rich in particular gifts or abilities or whatever, our care must be taken always to make sure that those things are not what we rely on.

[3 : 21] Rather, it's God in whom we rely. Now, very often, the way we find out that our trust has been placed falsely or misplaced in such strengths and resources is when those things go away from us.

When they're stripped away, suddenly our exposure to our lack of trust in God comes to the fore. For example, when I was studying in England, I suddenly realised how much I depended upon my job.

Without a job, because I was a full-time student, so much of what I'd relied upon was gone from me. And it was a good lesson, a very good lesson for me to learn to trust and rely on God's provision rather than the resources of having a job and the position or status that was associated with that.

Very often, if God is to direct us or redirect us to trust in Him, the way He goes about that is by stripping away the resources that we're rich in and exposing us to our need for God alone.

Now, that's by way of the situation facing ancient Israel or Judah in the 700s BC. It's exactly the same position for them.

[4 : 47] They didn't have, in some sense, many resources, a small nation faced with mighty nations round about. But they had some resources and it was on those resources that they relied first up, wrongly, rather than God.

So, firstly, they trusted in the nation Egypt to provide them backing and strength and defence from the superpower of Syria. That was their resource, but it was a stupid action because Egypt was defeated in 703 by the Assyrians.

They placed all their trust in that resource or that strength, that ally, and it was taken away, stripped away from them. And the next thing they did was, rather than place their strength in an ally against the superpower, let's place our trust in the superpower itself.

So, after the nation had begun to be invaded, they went and paid what was called tribute, money, gifts, gold, silver, maybe some treasures out of the temple, maybe animals, to the Assyrians themselves as a way of bargaining and entering into an agreement that Assyria would not conquer the land any further.

That was placing their trust in this political alliance or agreement, placing their trust in their enemy, in fact. They thought they could buy off Assyria and they were duped.

[6 : 17] They were deceived. Assyria did not have a very good track record for keeping their agreements with other nations. And so, no sooner had the envoys gone and paid the money and were on their way back to Jerusalem to say they're now our friends, than the Assyrian army was marching to the gates of Jerusalem itself.

The problem for God's people Judah was this. They had turned to place their trust in things other than God. Maybe at first in their own ability.

Or own strength. Maybe then in Egypt's strength. Maybe then in Assyria's alliance or paying tribute. But all of those things got stripped away and taken away.

And the result was that their need was exposed. They had nothing else to turn to. And so at last, finally, they turned in repentance to God himself.

The very place that Isaiah for probably 30 or 40 years has been encouraging the people to place their trust in. Now at last, they heed his word.

[7 : 29] But only when there's no other avenue to turn down. Isn't that so typical of us as well? So that's why this chapter begins.

Ah, woe. Chapter 33 of Isaiah on page 576. Woe or ah, you destroyer, who yourself have not been destroyed.

Now this is not the first chapter to begin with the word woe. But it's the first one with a difference. Chapter 28, 29, 30 and 31 all began with woe.

This is the fifth in a series. But the first four were all woe to you, in effect, Judah, people of God. Woe to you in Jerusalem. Woe to Zion.

But now comes the difference. Woe to Assyria is being stated here in verse 1. Why is that? Because these are people who have at last turned to God with repentance.

[8 : 34] Now comes the promise of destruction to Assyria, to the world's superpower. Something that did happen in 701, an angel of the Lord smote its army, and then another 70, 80, 90 years later, Babylon defeated it in a series of battles.

It's also the promise of treachery. See how it says that, you treacherous one with whom no one has dealt treacherously. That's because Assyria's treachery was seen in the fact that they took money to become Judah's friend, but no sooner had the envoys returned that they said, well, blow all that money.

Let's go and defeat them anyway. That's treachery. And so what is God promising at the end of verse 1? When you have stopped dealing treacherously, you will be dealt with treacherously. And interestingly, 20 years later, or a bit over, Sennacherib, the Assyrian emperor, in his own palace, was treacherously killed by his own sons.

God's word fulfilled as promised. Now, Judah's newfound faith, such as it is, is expressed in a prayer that follows in verse 2 onwards, just like the Psalms so often.

O Lord, be gracious to us, we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, arm being a symbol of strength and might, our salvation in the time of trouble.

[9 : 58] They are appealing to God's grace. Be gracious to us. They're not saying we deserve your favour or we deserve your salvation. They know they don't.

They've been brought to their knees, literally, in a helplessness because all their other resources are exhausted. Theirs is an expression of empty hands.

Yours, O God, is the strength. You've got the arm. You've got the salvation. We're stuck. We're helpless. We can do nothing. Just like in that great hymn, Nothing in my hand I bring. So that is, in effect, what is being prayed for here in verse 2.

Without empty hands, we cannot receive salvation from God. If we go to God with something in our hands, saying, well, here's my contribution, we will never receive the salvation God gives us and offers us.

Only with empty hands of helplessness will God extend his salvation to us because it is entirely and totally his work and his gift.

[11 : 08] For Israel, Judah, this was an act of God's mercy. No doubt in the years leading up to these words, they thought how harsh God is. He's taken away our strength.

He's taken away Egypt. He's taken away Assyria as our alliance. Why is God doing this to us? But it's God's mercy that is bringing them to their knees and bringing them to faith.

Now, how do you respond in your life when things go wrong? When your resources are stripped away? When your health might go? Your independence might go? When your family might go?

Or your job might go? Or your wealth might go? Or your gifts might go? Or your physical strength may go? Or whatever else you rely on may go? So often we shake our fist at God and we complain, why me?

But very often the reason why God may be in fact doing that for us is for our own good. To bring us to our knees. To show us that we've placed our false faith in those things.

[12 : 09] Good things though they are and good to use though they are. Our faith and trust must be placed in God and God alone. Not in our resources. Or our strengths.

So what God has been doing for Israel or Judah here is an act of great mercy to bring them to their knees in repentance and faith so that now with empty hands they can receive the salvation He's been offering them all through this book.

That's why throughout the Bible it seems so often that God is on the side of the poor and the humble and the lowly and the needy because they're the people who've got empty hands.

They're the people who know they've got nothing to help themselves. And so they turn to God. It's not that God is against the rich or the wealthy or the resourceful but He's against them when they rely on their resources rather than Him.

And so often it is wealth and strength that is a hindrance to God or a hindrance to us drawing closer to God rather.

[13 : 13] So He goes on in the prayer or the people go on in the prayer at the sound of tumult peoples fled before Your Majesty nations scattered. They realise that strength lies with God and God alone and they're confessing that in verse 3.

And in verse 4 when they say in a rather cryptic way that all the spoil all the booty that was taken by Assyria in their battle which was great in their victories over many nations all of that will be spoiled by others.

Just like locusts leap at and devour some harvest so will be the end of all the booty that Assyria has compiled and accumulated in their warfare.

These are great words and encouraging words but the sad thing is that it's taken so long for Israel or Judah to get to this point. Their problem is that they ought to have started with trust in God ought to have heeded Isaiah's very first words to turn from their evil ways and their self-reliance and turn to God but they haven't for 30, 40, 50 years maybe and now at last God brings them to their knees.

the prayer finishes with a hymn of praise in verses 5 and 6 the Lord is exalted he dwells on high we'll come back to those ideas a little bit later on but so often Isaiah has been attacking the pride and the self-exaltation of his hearers in Judah but now in this prayer there's a recognition that God is exalted therefore I am brought down low I am humbled or we are humbled in the face of an exalted God you see it's only when we realize our helplessness that our pride dissipates and goes away and then in verse 6 God is the one who will be the stability of your times not Assyria not Egypt not your own army not your own king not the city or its walls or anybody else but God alone he is the one with abundance of salvation wisdom knowledge and fear of the Lord that's Zion's treasure that's the thing that they've got to hold on to because it is worth eternity it is the only thing that matters forever fading as the worldlings pleasure

[15 : 34] John Newton writes in his hymn all its boasted pomp and show but solid joys and lasting treasure as described in verse 6 none but Zion's children know in verses 7 to 9 the Isaiah goes on to describe in further detail the current situation and the current problem the valiant the battle warriors the brave whoever they are of Judah they're crying in the streets and the envoys of peace weep bitterly they're weeping because their voyage or their mission to go and pay money to Assyria in order to stave off their threat and to become somehow a friendly state without being defeated it's come to nothing the Assyrians are at the gate and they're weeping bitterly because they realise the futility and failure of their own mission to buy off peace in verse 8 we get a description just as we've seen on TV time and again in recent years places and nations and cities of warfare like Bosnia and so on the streets are deserted travellers have quit the road how many people now go to Yugoslavia for holidays very very few compared to 10 or 15 years ago the treaty's broken its oaths are despised its obligation disregarded that's the treaty that was made with Assyria yes here's the money and yes okay we won't come and fight against you that's broken the ink was hardly dry it seems before Assyria broke that treaty just as their track record said and then in verse 9 probably in figurative language that the land itself nature itself mourns and languishes

Lebanon Sharon Bashan and Carmel that are mentioned there are the well known lush and fertile areas of the land and they're denuded of their trees their fertility is gone a picturesque way of saying that life's tough in some ways it's just like the sin and it's curse in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve had committed a sin and God said now it'll be thorns and thistles that'll grow up in the land it won't be easy pickings and this is in a sense a climax of that sort of thing that as sin takes its cumulative effect through history this land will suffer figuratively at least if not literally as well and during all this time God has been waiting the people have come to wait for God verse 2 told us and through all this time all this failure of Israel and Judah's resources

God has been waiting biding his time waiting for Judah's resources to expire and be exhausted for its independence to crumble and now in verse 10 three times in verse 10 now now is the time having brought them to their knees through these last few decades of strife and turmoil and warfare now is the time for God to act see what verse 10 says now I will arise now I will lift myself up now I will be exalted often in Hebrew poetry and this is poetry things were repeated once that is said twice as a way of emphasis and a way of poetry like we use rhyme Hebrews would use some sort of repetition but this verse says the same thing three times just like God in Isaiah 6 was described in his temple as holy holy holy now three times he is described as rising lifting up being exalted this is emphatic this is important

God's action you see is to arise yes there is a sense in which he will fight and a sense in which he will defend but his basic action is in a sense to stand up because when God stands and rises and is exalted then everything else falls into perspective independence of self crumbles and humbles and a serious threat is brought down in its perspective when God stands exalted high and lifted up as he was in Isaiah 6 we see just the weakness of the threat of Assyria and the weakness of Judah God's own people as well but what God is doing here in standing to rise not only humbles Assyria it not only humbles Judah but it humbles all pride and arrogance in the world way back in Isaiah 2 you may be able to remember all the way back to October when I preached on this passage in chapter 2 verse 17 what Isaiah then promised

God would do was this the haughtiness of people shall be humbled and the pride of everyone shall be brought low and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day and Isaiah is saying in verse 10 now this is the day it's interesting that throughout Isaiah comes this theme of God being exalted he's looking into the future awaiting that time when it will happen and in Isaiah 52 and 53 we get a picture of God being exalted high and lifted up the same words being used and repeated but it's there to die it's the servant of God being lifted up high and exalted to die for the sins of God's world and God's people you see it's an extraordinary paradox that at the place of God's most glorious exaltation in history it occurs at the cross when the sins of the world are atoned for by the suffering servant of God himself how can that be how can that paradox stand because as so often in the Bible not only in Isaiah

[22 : 08] God's strength is made manifest in weakness in a death on a cross so when Isaiah sees God arising and lifting himself up here in verse 10 ultimately that's where it happens on the cross in what looks to be an act of humiliation it is in fact an act of God's greatest glory and exaltation throughout these years Israel had been impatient not waiting for God impatient wanting to force the solution wanting to find out the solution themselves Isaiah had called on them to rest and trust in the Lord and wait for him now only have they begun to do that there's a warning there I guess to us as well that often we are so busy using our resources and gifts thinking that we're doing lots of good things that we're too busy or too blind to see and to wait for God not that we should be idle far from that but we ought to be clear in our perspective acknowledging

God's work rather than being too activist in trying to force his hand well the result of God arising is described in the verses that follow verses 11 and 12 tell us that Assyria's conquests will come to nothing you Assyria this time it seems conceive chaff that's rubbish that's the bit of dross left over from the harvest that just blows away in the wind you bring forth stubble that's nothing who wants stubble you think you've made a great harvest of the world by defeating these enemies but when God arises you'll see that it's just something that can be blown away in the wind your breath is a fire that will consume you that's a shock we might expect your breath to be a fire that will consume other nations because that's what seems to be the reality in this recent history of Isaiah's time but now it turns back on themselves your breath will consume you because you see sin self-destructs sin has within it seeds of corruption and decay that will in the end bring about the death of the sinner who practices the sin this is a terrible indictment on Assyria who seems to be so strong and mighty and effective that all their work in the sight of God comes to nothing and even worse brings about its own destruction as well how's

Judah God's people going to respond to this word verse 13 invites their response here you who are far away what I've done probably talking about other nations but you who are near certainly talking about Judah God's people now in Jerusalem acknowledge my might what will they respond how will they respond to these words of the destruction of Assyria one can imagine great fear it's a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God and here is the mighty Assyria on our doorstep being described as just nothing if God can do that to Assyria then what hope have we got and that's the fear the terror that's expressed in verse 14 the sinners in Zion are afraid trembling has seized the godless not fear and trembling at Assyria now but fear and trembling at God who among us can live with a devouring fire who among us can live with everlasting flames not just the fire of Assyria's army but the everlasting fire and flames of

God's own judgment God is a consuming fire from early on in the Bible to its very end at the burning bush in Exodus 3 God is fire on Mount Sinai when Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments God is fire the pillar of cloud by day and by fire at night through the wilderness God's presence with his people and then of course on Mount Carmel when God answers with fire but then in also another way on another mountain on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 when God's presence is marked again by tongues fire this is fire that destroys sin and that's why it's sinners who are afraid in verse 14 it's the sinners in Zion who are afraid but the ones who aren't sinners in Zion need not be afraid and they're described in verse 15 the ones who will be able to stand before the fire of

God are those who practice what verse 15 says those who walk righteously that's behavior and practice and habit not just the occasional righteous deed but those who make it their habit and practice those who speak uprightly their words are right a warning to us who use words so casually and deceitfully so often those who despise the gain of oppression not those who shun it but actually despise it those who wave away a bribe instead of accepting it in a land where corruption was so rife who stopped their ears from hearing of bloodshed probably because they know that watching it on TV and hearing it on the radio time and time again makes us immune to bloodshed and hardens our hearts and they shut their eyes from looking on evil because the more we look on evil and more we fill our eyes with wrong things the more our heart is filled with them as well they're the people who are righteous in verse 15 and they need not fear the fire of

[28 : 00] God the fire of God will just purify them it will not destroy them you see what's needed is godly character it doesn't say that those who are safe are those who've got lots of achievements those who've got lots of great academic records those who've got lots of wealth or those who've got lots of resources or ability or ingenuity or networks those who are safe from God's fire are those who have godly character that's what matters in the end godly character not strength wealth power or influence godly character and the promise for them is that they'll live on the heights their refuge will be in the fortresses of rocks their food will be supplied their water assured the basic things of life but spiritually speaking as well God will protect and provide all that they need they will be safe and secure forever what follows in the remainder of the chapter is a little picture of the resultant security that comes for those who have godly character as described in verse 15 they will see the king in his beauty the beginning of verse 17 the king here not just Hezekiah but the Messiah the king himself on the throne as

Isaiah saw in Isaiah chapter 6 they'll see a large land that stretches far away at the end of verse 17 not little isolated Jerusalem because that's all the land that was left but now presumably the land that God had originally promised extending from the Euphrates to the Negev desert God's promises being fulfilled they will have relief and wonder in verses 18 and 19 because Assyria is gone the huge threat that they saw they thought they had no hope of overcoming it's gone and they'll wonder and say where's gone what's happened here where are they no longer are they there verses 18 and 19 all the threats have gone instead of seeing Assyria on their doorstep rather they'll see Zion or Jerusalem in verse 20 but look on the Zion that they're looking at not a place that's besieged not a place that's under threat but look on Zion the city of our appointed festivals that suggests that God is there and it's full of joy and celebration as they commemorate the main festivals they were charged to do back by Moses your eyes will see Jerusalem and it won't be a place of strife but it will be a quiet habitation it'll be safe it'll be quiet an immovable tent rather than something temporary something permanent whose stakes will never be pulled up and none of whose ropes will be broken that's a place of absolute and eternal security because it's

God's place but there at its heart is the Lord himself in majesty the place of broad rivers and streams where no galley with oars can go nor stately ships can pass probably is saying that that God will be a wide river that is a defense for a city and no warship can come up it'll be safe and peaceful why because the Lord himself in verse 22 is the judge the ruler and the king and he will save yes you can trust him God himself you see is at a heart and the focus of this vision it is not a humanistic view of heaven which has got peace and love and all our friends will be there and we'll have a nice time thank you much very much forever this is a heaven that is God centered God is its heart and God is its focus as indeed the heaven to which we are destined is also verse 23 is a strange verse but I think it's saying this it's saying to

Judah your rigging hangs loose that is you're a boat that is drifting you are helpless but even though you're drifting and helpless like a Hulk or a Sydney to Hobart yacht that's lost its mast or rudder God himself will protect you and save you the prey and spoil in abundance will be divided that is you'll be victorious even the lame will fall to plundering lame who couldn't walk even they will get plunder from the battle that God wins for them so it's saying again that even though you're absolutely helpless God God will save and then another picture of this great place there will be no one who will be sick so they won't find any hospitals there no doctors there probably either and there'll be no one who needs forgiveness of sins because forgiveness is there for all often in the Bible sin and sickness are linked in some way generally at least if not specifically they'll be gone in this place where was this fulfilled was it fulfilled just a couple of years later when the

Assyrian army beat that retreat because the angel of the Lord smote them in one sense yes in one sense yes there was peace and Jerusalem was a place of festivity and joy and peace peace and peace and you see Old Testament prophecy is a bit like a mountain range if you imagine that you're in the plane and you're looking ahead to mountains on the horizon and you see a mountain that looks the tallest and you get to it and climb it and you realize that it's not the tallest that behind it lies yet a taller mountain which from the original perspective you couldn't see it was blocked out by the first mountain and when you get to climb that one you realize that there lies yet a taller one further on Old Testament prophecy is a bit like a mountain range an immediate fulfillment such as in 701 when Sennacherib was defeated does fulfill these words in one sense but when you get there you realize that it's not fulfilled absolutely there is more to be fulfilled in a far bigger way than just

[34 : 27] Sennacherib's defeat meant you see a bigger mountain looms on the horizon and so the Old Testament history progresses towards that bigger mountain but in the end the biggest mountain if you like the greatest fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy lies in Jesus Christ he is the one who has salvation in abundance and only him he is the one who is perfect peace he is the one who himself the writer to the Hebrews tells us is the holy Jerusalem or Zion the one to whom Christians have come in the end these words though there is some limited fulfillment within the Old Testament period itself finds its greatest fulfillment in Jesus Christ and even then in two parts of course in his first coming but ultimately in his return to this world the salvation that the people of Judah received at the hands of Assyria by God was just a foretaste of the great salvation that Jesus is bringing us all at the end of history so when Isaiah says wait for God and trust in him he's saying to us the same keep waiting and keep trusting in Jesus

Christ amen you