

Our God Saves: Turn

A Gracious God for Rebellious People

Isaiah 30-33

Mark Vroegop

“Ah, stubborn children,” declares the LORD, “who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, 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! 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 Zoan and his envoys reach Hanes, 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 Negeb. Through a land of trouble and anguish, from where come the lioness and the lion, the adder and the flying fiery serpent, they carry their 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 inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. For they are a 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, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.” 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 with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern.” 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.” But you were unwilling, and you said, “No! We will flee upon horses”; therefore you shall flee away; and, “We will ride upon swift steeds”; 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 on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill. 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 (Isa. 30:1-18, ESV).

“The more you see something, the less you actually see it.”¹

Sometimes this is called visual lethargy. It’s when you’ve seen the same thing, a beautiful thing, so many times that you begin to lose your awe and wonder. What was stunning at first because it was new becomes mundane, normal, and taken for granted.

The first few times you experience something, it can captivate you. The first time you see the Rocky Mountains, it was incredible; but when you live in Denver, they can become part of the backdrop. The first time you saw the skyline of Indianapolis at night, it stunned you. Now it’s just a marker as you drive home. The first time you saw the leaves changing in Brown County, it almost moved you to tears. Now it’s just another place to visit. “The more you see something, the less you actually see it.”

The same could be true of your spiritual life. The first few months and years at church, you left stunned with gratitude. But, over time, it’s easy to become a consumer not a beholder. The first year with your Small Group was amazing. But it’s easy to become annoyed with the “uniqueness” of each person. You felt so fulfilled serving, and then it became mundane. The joy was gone.

Here’s the warning: Paul Tripp says, “Familiarity with the things of God will cause you to lose your awe.”²

Tripp unpacks this a bit further for us:

You’ve spent so much time in Scripture that the grand redemptive narrative, with its expansive wisdom, doesn’t excite you anymore. You’ve spent so much time exegeting the atonement that you stand at the foot of the cross with little weeping and scant rejoicing. You’ve spent so much time discipling others that you are no longer amazed at the reality of having been chosen to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. You’ve spent so much time unpacking the theology of Scripture that you’ve forgotten the end game of personal holiness. You’ve spent so much time in strategic local church ministry planning that you’ve lost your wonder at the sovereign Planner who guides your every moment. You’ve spent so much time meditating on what it means to lead others in worship, but you have little private awe.³

I’m sure that you resonate with this concern. When it comes to our spiritual lives, it’s easy for amazing grace to be kind of “meh.” It’s tempting for us to lose our “buy-in” because important biblical truths have become mundane. If we’re honest, it’s easy to extinguish a passion to follow Jesus.

As I studied Isaiah 30-33, I was stunned over and over with two things that I think help reignite our passion: a biblical rehearsing of what we are like and what God has done. One of the strategies for fighting against spiritual lethargy is careful consideration God’s grace to sinners.

¹ I’m thankful for this concept as found in Paul Tripp’s article entitled “No Longer Amazed by Grace” - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/no-longer-amazed-by-grace/>

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/no-longer-amazed-by-grace/>

³ Ibid

Our theme for Isaiah is “Our God Saves.” In chapters 30-33 we see “Our God Saves Sinners.” We see God’s grace to rebels. Let’s look at the contrast between human rebellion and God’s grace.

Human Rebellion

Throughout chapters 30-33, we find Isaiah bouncing back and forth between a focus on God’s grace versus human rebellion. It’s as if he says, “You are like this. . .but God is like that.” In these chapters, we see three expressions of human rebellion: (1) pride, (2) stubbornness, and (3) complacency.

1. Pride

Chapter 30 again begins with the word “Ah” which is a word that indicates a “woe.” And the next description is “stubborn children.” Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people are regularly rebuked for their stiff necks. It’s a description of what humans tend to do when they are filled with pride. They raise up their heads and refuse to budge. Parents, it’s one of the reasons you tell your children to look at you in a moment of intense instruction. The posture of the head and neck communicate something important: pride.

Notice how their rebellious pride is expressed: “. . .who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit that they may add sin to sin” (30:1). You could think of this as an overview or a summary of the problem.

Remember that the people of God faced a real concern with the nation of Assyria. Nation after nation fell under the military might of Assyria, including the northern kingdom of Israel. There was a real threat. The people were genuinely fearful. But, in their fear, they pridefully didn’t seek the Lord’s help in practical ways. There was a disconnect between temple worship and daily life when it came to trusting God.

Ray Ortlund says this:

It’s possible to believe all the right things but to negotiate everyday life by another wisdom, little different from the world. Isaiah’s generation did that. They knew about the exodus and the saving power of God. They knew their Bibles. But in the hard business of daily life, they made their way by other ground rules.⁴

They carried out their own plans. They “set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my direction to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh” (v. 2). Why did they do this? Why do we do it? Verse 1 uses the word “alliance,” and it means a protective covering.⁵ They looked to earthly solutions because they wanted security, safety, and comfort.

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [Isaiah: God Saves Sinners](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 171.

⁵ J. Alec Motyer, [Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 218.

Human beings crave control. Things that are out of control challenge our autonomy. They're threatening. They tempt us to be angry, depressed, or anxious. Trusting God seems too impractical. Frankly, it doesn't feel safe even though "Egypt's help is worthless and empty" (v. 7).

Where do you tend to go for control? What are the things that, when they aren't in your control, you find yourself angry, depressed, or anxious about? Or another way to think about—where do you turn instead of God?

Woe to those who go 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! (Isa. 31:1)

2. Stubbornness

The second characteristic of our rebellion is our tendency to be stubborn. Central to that sinful posture is an unwillingness to listen. Verse 9 makes that very clear. In fact, verses 10-11 put words in the mouths of the 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, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 30:10-11).

Notice that it wasn't that they wanted all messages to stop. They wanted prophets and seers to give them messages which were agreeable and didn't challenge their idols. According to verse 12, they wanted content that affirmed their "oppression and perverseness." One mark of stubbornness is only listening to people who agree with you.

What's more, they refused to turn to God when he offered grace. They refused to follow God's ways.

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." But you were unwilling, and you said, "No! We will flee upon horses"; therefore you shall flee away; and, "We will ride upon swift steeds"; therefore your pursuers shall be swift (Isa. 30:15-16).

The tragedy of the human race is our constant stubbornness—a refusal to listen and a refusal to follow God's ways.

3. Complacency

The final example that Isaiah provides is found beginning in 32:9: "Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice; you complacent daughters, give ear to my speech" (Isa. 32:9). This text speaks to more than just women. The women and daughters in this text are representative of the entire culture.

The spiritual life of the nation is hanging by a thread. The nation is putting its confidence in earthly sources. And things seem to look good around them. Commentator Gary Smith says:

“These women are victims of deceit and the political spinning of military events that made a bad situation look optimistic. Consequently, these women feel very secure and safe (cf. 3:16–4:1; Amos 6:1) because their complacency was rationally based on the news they heard from the royal court. They accepted the propaganda that they could put their hope in Egypt.⁶

Despite all the warnings from Isaiah about their need to turn, they are careless and complacent. They see no need to change. Everything’s going to be okay.

Pride, stubbornness, and complacency have always characterized humanity. We think we know better. We don’t want to listen. And we really don’t care about making any changes. Human beings are notorious for going back to their former ways and repeating the mistakes of the past. That’s the bad news.

But these chapters are amazing because of the grace of God that follows.

God’s Grace

All of this rebellion, familiar as it is, merely serves as the background for the beautiful demonstration of God’s grace. As bad as our sin is, God’s grace is greater still. And this is especially important to remember when the pressures of life are tempting us to put our trust in something other than him.

We need regular, hearty reminders of the power of God’s grace. It’s how God woos us toward obedience and faithfulness. It’s why you need Sunday services and corporate worship. We need regular and meaningful reminders of the amazing grace of God.

There’s a great summary verse in Isaiah 30:15.

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” (Isa. 30:15).

This is God’s offering of grace. It’s an offering to embrace repentance (“returning”) and hoping (“rest”) in the Holy One of Israel. Are you familiar with the concept of repentance? It essentially means a turning from one thing to another. In the New Testament, it means a change of mind. Repentance means turning away from trusting in ourselves or things in which we place our trust. It’s turning to Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, the purpose of our life, and our sense of identity.

But this verse also talks about quietness and trust. This refers to peace and specifically the absence of panic and restlessness.⁷ And it is this peace and confidence that serve to strengthen God’s people both at the foundation of their lives and in every difficult circumstance.

⁶ Gary V. Smith, [Isaiah 1–39](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 544.

⁷ J. Alec Motyer, [Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 221.

It's like the old hymn:

*O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear.
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

But there's more here. So much more. Look at 30:18!

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 (Isa. 30:18).

What a statement! Even though God's people have been incredibly rebellious, God is patiently waiting for them. What follows in verses 19-21 is a prediction of a future day. It's full of God's goodness and grace:

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 though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. 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!" (Isa. 30:19-22)

Even though God has allowed hardship and discipline ("bread of adversity and the water of affliction"), his purposes will be fully accomplished. In fact, all of life can be seen through this vision of God's grace. Assyria is no threat to God's people. Egypt is hardly a place of safety and security. God's people belong to him. He will protect them, guard them, and keep them (vv. 27-33).

This reminds me of Romans 8:31, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" God is the protector of his people. He's like a growling lion (31:4) or hovering birds (31:5).

The grace of God is connected to a future king. Once again, we learn of a righteous ruler. A leader whose reign is characterized by:

- 32:2 – safety and protection
- 32:3 – full understanding of his people
- 32:4 – ceasing of misunderstanding
- 32:5 – the foolish and evil person will no longer be in power

So much of this is in the future. But chapter 33 is written for the immediate situation. This chapter likely refers to the double cross on the part of Assyria. The destroyer has not been destroyed, and they've been betrayed (v. 1). The heroes are crying in the streets, and their envoys weep bitterly (v. 7). Life is falling apart. Their plans have backfired.

And yet God is still gracious to them—and to you when you've walked away!

O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you. Be our arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble (Isa. 33:2).

The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure (Isa. 33:5-6).

Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be plucked up, nor will any of its cords be broken. But there the LORD in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor majestic ship can pass. For the LORD is our judge; the LORD is our lawgiver; the LORD is our king; he will save us (Isa. 33:20-22).

What a glorious vision of a righteous, gracious king waiting for his people in order to deliver them! God is gracious to rebellious people. He aims to redeem the proud, stubborn, and complacent person with kindness, patience, and power.

Applications

We've covered a lot of ground in these chapters. Let me give you a few questions to consider:

1. **What's your Egypt?** What do you trust outside the promises of God?⁸ Where does prayer and seeking the wisdom of God fall into your calculus for how you live each day? Where do you go besides the Lord when you are seeking control?
2. **Do you savor the grace of God?** It's possible to be so familiar with the grace of God that it loses its awe and wonder. And when that happens, we begin to live out of duty, performance, and perfectionism. What is necessary today to rekindle your passion for Jesus?
3. **Are you ready to turn to him today?** God is ready and willing to offer you grace upon grace. But we need to embrace the offer of renewal by turning back to him or to him for the first time.

The powerful and transforming truth is that where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more! My pride, stubbornness, and complacency are huge. But God's grace is greater still. Oh, church, let us rejoice in our returning to the Lord because our rebellions are many, but God's mercy is more.

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⁸ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 174–175.