

Isaiah 30:1-21

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[0 : 0 0] I don't know what it's like in your home, but in our house we sometimes have a bit of an issue with the failure of some members of the household, who shall remain nameless, not answering straight away when called. I'd be a rich man if I had a pound for every time I heard another member of the family say, you need to answer me straight away. You can try and work out who the different personalities are in this little story for yourselves if you wish, but if you ask me later I won't confirm or deny any of the conclusions you come to. What about God? Does God answer us straight away? He's certainly not under any obligation to answer us straight away, but does He?

Our text this evening seems to suggest, or more than suggest, state that He does. There in verse 19 of Isaiah chapter 30 we read as follows. These are words directed to God's people in the time of Isaiah.

O people of Zion who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious He will be when you cry for help? As soon as He hears, He will answer you. Isaiah certainly is anticipating what will happen in the future. He's not describing something that has happened, but rather anticipating what will be God's response in the event that His people cry out for help. He certainly anticipates that that is what will happen at some point and when they do. This is the promise that is given. This is the assurance.

As soon as He hears, He will answer you. What do we make of this statement of Isaiah? At one level, we can take it as a wonderful promise and encouragement that we could take and own for ourselves. Isn't it a wonderful thing that as soon as God hears, He answers us? It's a kind of verse or declaration you might expect to come up on your Facebook feed for those of you who are users of Facebook, you know, a poster, and this would be a lovely verse to have there. As soon as God hears, He will answer you. The kind of thing you'd want to share with others for their encouragement. So, at one level, you could say, well, this is very encouraging. But at another level, these words might only serve to bemuse and discourage.

Some might very sincerely respond, well, that's what it says, but that's not my experience. That's what it says. I recognize that's what it says there in the Bible. But I've cried out to God on occasions, and it's not been my experience that as soon as He hears, He answers me. Sometimes I wonder if He hears at all.

[3 : 11] And certainly, if He does hear, and perhaps you're willing to acknowledge that, yes, He certainly must hear. He's God after all, but He doesn't seem to answer. And so, words like that, far from being encouraging might prove to be bemusing, if not actually discouraging. So, I want to spend a little time this evening thinking about this statement or promise concerning God's answering the prayer or cry of His people as soon as He hears. Now, the manner I'm going to do this is as follows. I want to briefly sketch out the historical context to this statement or this promise directed to God's people. And it's necessary for us to do that, and I hope it proves helpful as we try to apply the promise to ourselves and better understand the context in which it is given and in some ways the conditions that accompany it. I'm not sure if conditions is the right language, but as we explore it, I think things will become clearer. So, that's the first thing I want to do. Just explore a little bit the historical context. Then, having done that, to ask three questions about this promise as originally delivered to God's people at this time. Ask the question, when is the promise applicable to God's people in the day of Isaiah? When, at what point would this promise be applicable to them? So, a when question, then a why question, why or on what grounds is the promise given? And again, hopefully the answer to the question will clarify the question itself if it's not clear to you what that question is about.

And the third question is, how is the promise fulfilled or how is the promise of an answer fulfilled? Having done that, then finally what I'll try and do is bring this closer to home and explore whether or how we can claim or apply this promise to ourselves. Whenever you cry for help, as soon as God hears, He will answer you. So, let's think a little bit about what's going on when God, through the prophet, addresses His people in this way and makes this promise to them. The events that lead God to make this promise to His people are taking place during Isaiah's lifetime, roughly around 700 BC. And this chapter does provide us with concrete historical information that allows us to have a fairly precise identification of the historical context. That's not always the case. We've been going through Isaiah chapter 40 these past few weeks, and on the very first time that we thought about it, we had to acknowledge that the chapter doesn't give precise historical references. But in the case of chapter 30, it certainly does. In verses 1 and 2, Woe to the obstinate children, declares the Lord, to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my spirit, heaping sin upon sin, who go down to Egypt without consulting me, and so on in the following verses at the beginning of the chapter. So, what's going on here is that the kingdom of Judah, so this would be subsequent to the fall of the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital is under threat from Assyria. Assyria was the dominant world power at this time, and in the face of that threat they're seeking to make alliances that will provide them so they imagine protection vis-à-vis Assyria, and so they turned to Egypt for help. Now, it's worth noting that this is not an alliance of equals. Egypt was a much more powerful nation than Judah, and in order to secure this alliance, Judah will have to pay handsomely for the alliance. And this is a fact that Isaiah reprimands them for in very mocking terms in verses 6 and 7 of the chapter. And maybe as we read it, it wasn't immediately obvious what's going on here. But basically what's going on here, Isaiah is saying, you've paid all this money to secure this alliance that will provide you no help.

Let's read again those two verses. Through a land of hardship and distress, of lions and lionesses, of adders and darting snakes, the envoys, that's the envoys from Judah, carry their riches on donkeys' backs, their treasures and the humps of camels to that unprofitable nation, to Egypt, whose help is utterly useless. And so, Isaiah mocks them.

All this money that you've gathered together, all the gold and the silver, in order to really buy protection from Egypt, and it's completely useless. Egypt will not prove to be of any help, of any protection versus Assyria. In fact, as far as Egypt is concerned, this alliance is useful only in as much as Judah can serve as a kind of buffer state between Egypt and the ongoing march of the Assyrians that Egypt fears will eventually reach Egypt itself. So, this is what's going on. And there's, of course, a bitter irony in Judah turning to Egypt to secure this alliance, as this, of course, involves them retreating to the very nation from whom they were redeemed by the Lord. They were slaves in Egypt and they were rescued from Egypt. And how bitter the irony that now God's people should be retreating in this humiliating way, retreating to Egypt and seeking help in Egypt. In fairness, it would have been wrong for them to sought help in any of the neighboring nations. But there's a real, there's an edge to it when it's Egypt that they return to, and part of the reason for God's disgust that is shared by the prophet. Why does Judah act in this way? Well, they're unwilling to listen to God.

In verse 9, we're told that these are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the Lord's instruction. They're intent rather on their prophet speaking smooth things to them. In verse 10, tell us pleasant things or smooth things, prophesy illusions, that's what they want to hear. And they no longer wish to deal with the Holy One of Israel. Verse 11, leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel.

[9 : 49] And I think what's going on here is that they're not saying we don't believe in God anymore. We don't want Yahweh to be our God anymore. We want to have a God, and well, Yahweh will do. But we don't want the Holy God of Israel to be challenging us and confronting us and making us feel uncomfortable and telling us that what we're doing is wrong. And we don't want to hear that message from the prophets. Bring us a soothing message about God who loves us and who will care for us and who will be tolerant of what we're doing.

That's what we want to hear. If we had to summarize the problem, we could see it as a problem of trust, or who or what Judah is putting its trust in. What we find is that they're putting their trust in men.

They're putting their trust in the military commanders of Egypt. They're putting their trust in wealth, the wealth that they're able to gather together to pay for this help, this security. And ultimately, they're trusting in self.

They trust in their own schemes to secure their survival rather than turning to the Lord for help. And in those circumstances, God reminds them of a simple truth that their salvation that they need, their deliverance from Assyria, their salvation lies in returning and in resting, in repenting and in resting. There in verse 15, this is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel says, in repentance or in return. The word can be translated in either way. In returning and resting is your salvation. In quietness and trust is your strength. They need to return to God and they need to rest in God. So, that's the context of what's going on. Now, let's think about the three questions that we can pose to this promise that then follows. O people of Zion who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious He will be when you cry for help. As soon as He hears, He will answer you. So, the first question that I said that we would consider is, when is the promise applicable to God's people at this time? In what circumstances will God answer as soon as He hears? Well, it's clear. It will be when the people return and rest, when the people repent and rest and trust in God. These are the two elements that need to be present. And these are the two elements that Isaiah anticipates will be present in the promise that he gives. Notice there in verse 19, O people of Zion who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious He will be when you cry for help. What are the two elements? Well,

Isaiah anticipates that they will acknowledge their need. The weeping speaks of a people who are broken, a people who have been humbled, a people who recognize that they stand in need of help.

[12 : 45] God's people weeping in the face of their tragedy and crisis and chaos. And this weeping is evidence. There certainly would appear to be evidence that they finally acknowledge their need for help. So, that's necessary. But not only to acknowledge their need for help, but to actually cry out for help.

And that is what Isaiah also anticipates they will do. How gracious he will be when you cry for help. These are the elements that point to genuine repentance. And it is when such heartfelt and genuine repentance exists that God's promise to answer as soon as he hears holds true. So, it's a promise.

It is a promise that can be relied on and can be trusted in. But it is a promise that will apply in these circumstances when God's people repent and turn to him and cry out to him. So, that's when the promise is applicable. But then the second question, why or on what grounds is the promise given?

And for that, or to answer that question, we turn to the wonderful language of verse 18. Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you. He rises to show you a compassion. The grounds for this promise from God to His people, when you cry, I will answer you. What are the grounds for that promise?

Well, the grounds are nothing other than the grace of God. And the language that is used here to describe God's grace is moving and it's vivid and it's beautiful. The gracious disposition of God towards the people who have been foolish, who have been rebellious, who have been stubborn, but who finally recognize their need and turn to Him in repentance. The language that is used, as I say, is beautiful.

[14 : 44] Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you. It's as if God is waiting for the slightest opportunity to detect even the smallest evidence of genuine repentance and He will jump in, as it were, and show His grace. He longs to be gracious to you. He rises to show you compassion. He's not sitting, waiting, indifferent to the plight of His own, but rather He's the one who comes to the encounter of His people. As I was thinking of this language, the picture that came to my mind was the picture that's painted by the parable of the prodigal son. And the father there in that parable running to the encounter of his rebellious son long before the son has had opportunity to even acknowledge his guilt and plead for mercy. Now, we know from the parable that the son was already repentant, but the picture that's painted is of a father waiting for him who cannot possibly know that, and yet he rushes to the encounter of his son. He longs to be gracious to his son. He rises to show his son mercy and compassion.

And this is what we are told of God, that the grounds of the promise that when you cry for help, I will answer you, and I will answer you at the very moment that you cry out. As soon as I hear, I will answer you. The grounds for that promise are the grace of God, beautifully described in this verse. And not only in verse 18, but that is repeated in verse 19, how gracious he will be when you cry for help. God's promise to answer as soon as he hears is grounded in his grace. But his grace does not operate at cross purposes with his justice. In that same verse 18, in the second half of the verse, Isaiah acknowledges, for the Lord is the God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him.

And perhaps if all we had were the words of this verse, it would be difficult for us to understand how it is that these two realities of God's grace and God's justice merge together and are consistent one with another. But of course, in the light of the gospel, in the light of the work of Jesus, we know that God has provided a way for his justice to be satisfied in the exercise of his grace.

And that is the way of the cross. At the cross, God's justice is satisfied. And at the cross, his grace is revealed and poured out. But then the third question that we were posing about or concerning this promise is how is the promise answered? So, Isaiah says, as soon as he hears, as soon as the Lord hears, he will answer you. Okay? But what will the answer be is the question that I suppose arises.

What will the answer be? It's an immediate answer. As soon as he hears, the promise is a promise that is kept by God. But what is the answer? Well, I think in verses 20 and 21, we're given an indication of what the answer will be or certainly what the answer might be. And it's maybe somewhat surprising.

[18 : 13] We read there, although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more. With your own eyes, you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it.

There seems to be two ways in which God answers or Isaiah anticipates God answering His people. First of all, with affliction, the bread of affliction, the water of affliction, but also with direction.

A voice will direct you. You'll hear a voice telling you what to do and where to go. A voice. Whose voice? Well, here in the church Bible, the reference is made to your teachers.

Your teachers will be hidden no more. And that perhaps could be a reference to God's prophets, providing direction to God's people. It could be, though that does leave us thinking, well, has Isaiah not been given direction to these people throughout all this time. And so, we're left a little uncertain as to whether that is what the reference is to. As the passage goes on to speak of this voice that will be heard by God's people, there does seem to be this looking forward to the privileges and the blessings of the new covenant when God's people will be blessed with that internal voice of God in His or by His Holy Spirit and where the law of God will be engraved on our hearts and no longer only on tablets of stone.

And if that is indeed what Isaiah is looking forward to, that would perhaps explain why these words are translated somewhat differently in the ESV, where the teacher or teachers is identified in the manner of the translation. I'll just read what verse, or the manner in which verse 20 is translated in that alternative translation. And it's as follows, and though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your teacher, with a capital T, will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your teacher. And so, the answer really that is promised is God speaking to them, God instructing them in the midst of affliction, perhaps by means of affliction, but God's voice will be heard by them and they'll hear His voice and they'll recognize His voice and they'll respond to His voice. So, the promise is a marvelous promise, the promise to answer as soon as He hears. But the answer may not be the answer that we would be hoping for or looking for. For the citizens of Judah, God promises affliction that refines and a voice that guides. Then the final thing that I want to just do in the time that remains is to ask whether we can claim this promise for ourselves. When you cry for help, as soon as you cry, He hears and He will answer you. Now, we might say, well, it's a promise in the

[21 : 37] Bible. Of course, we can claim it for ourselves, but that's not necessarily the case. There are promises that are given by God, in particular historic circumstances that are applicable at that time to believers in those circumstances that are not necessarily applicable to us. You know, if I give you, it might almost appear like a silly example. If you think of the disciples when they were fishing and they hadn't caught fish all night, and then Jesus said, well, cast your net on the other side and you'll get a whole net load of fish. It's a promise. Do that and you'll be successful in your fishing trip? It's a promise, but obviously it was a promise for the disciples at that moment.

It's not something that we can take. We can't go out fishing and if we're having a bad night, just open the Bible and say, ah, here's a promise. You know, if I cast my net the other side, I'll get lots of fish. So, it's not a promise applicable to us. There are truths that we can draw from it, but the promise itself is not obviously and evidently is not applicable.

Well, what about this promise? Well, I think when it comes to this promise, though it was given to God's people at a particular historic moment, I think it is a promise that we can claim for ourselves.

In the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, we have a repeated theme, this promise that God hears and is quick to answer His people. Listen to the Psalmist as he shares his experience in Psalm 138 and in verse 3, on the day I called, you answered me.

We have the assurances of Jesus directed to His disciples, recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. And you're familiar with all of these promises that are promises directed to all of us as God's people.

[23 : 31] But how do we then explain our experienced reality of not receiving an immediate answer? If we say, well, this promise is applicable, why is it in the real world, we might say, in our experience, that doesn't appear to be what happens. Well, what are the possibilities regarding this, the appearance of God not answering when He hears? Well, I think there's only two possibilities that we can contemplate. You might think they're ridiculous possibilities, but in terms of logically, I think there's only two possibilities. One is that God doesn't hear us, and so if He doesn't hear us, then He's not going to be able to answer us. Or the other possibility that I think we'll find more fruitful in exploring is that we don't hear God. So, He does answer us, but we don't hear Him.

But let's just think, first of all, maybe for the purpose of discarding, the first possibility, at least theoretically, that God doesn't hear us. And we might say, well, that's ridiculous. Of course, God hears us. We think of how the Bible, in repeated occasions, speaks of God as the one who whoever hears. Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear, says the same prophet Isaiah. Or the psalmist, does He who implanted the ear not hear? Does He who formed the eye not see? It does seem inconceivable that God doesn't hear us when we cry. And yet, there is a sense of the psalmist in which God can hear and not hear at the same time. You might say, well, what madness is this? Well, again, let's turn to what the psalmist acknowledges was his experience on one occasion.

In Psalm 66 and in verse 18, we're going to sing from this psalm at the close of our service, If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. Of course, it's not that God doesn't hear that prayer. The God who is all-knowing, omniscient, of course, He hears the prayer, but He doesn't listen to it. He doesn't give it the attention that He would give to a prayer that is prayed in sincerity and in humility. If we're cherishing sin in our heart, then the psalmist makes it very clear the Lord would not or will not listen. The issue is that we need to pray with humility and faith.

This is what Isaiah is anticipating the people of Judah will do. Hence, the immediate answer. Had the people of Judah not repented, had they not returned, had they not rested in God, then they could have cried to their heart's content. If it had not been a reflection of a sincere turning from their folly to God, then they would have discovered what the psalmist discovered. If I cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. Or think of what the chronicler says about this in 2 Chronicles 7 and verse 14. Again, words that I think we'll be quite familiar with. If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. There's tremendous promises there of God hearing and responding and healing, but it's all in the context of God's people humbling themselves, seeking His face, turning from their wicked ways. God does not require perfect prayers, but He does demand sincere prayers. Now, listen to what John Calvin has to say about this in reflecting on this matter. He says as follows, integrity of heart, not perfection, is indispensable.

If we seek God in sincerity, we shall never be disappointed. So, God doesn't heed us. You might say, well, that's not the answer. But perhaps in the sense that the psalmist indicates that if we cherish sin in our heart, then the Lord will not listen. But also an explanation to the mystery, if you wish, of our seeming experience of God not hearing and answering when we cry out for help. Perhaps the answer more often is that we don't hear God. We aren't listening to His voice. You know, in the answer that Isaiah contemplates for Judah, the answer is God's voice speaking to them. You will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it. And sometimes the problem is that God is speaking. His voice is granting to us direction, answer, but we don't hear His voice. For us today, the manner in which God will speak to us, the manner in which the voice of God comes to us, as He answers us when we cry for help is through the Bible, accompanied by the light granted to us by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps sometimes the reason why it appears that God is not answering is because we're not actually hearing His voice.

[28 : 43] He is answering, but we don't hear Him. Or maybe we don't recognize His answer. You know, the answer, as we've discovered in the case of Judah, was maybe not the answer they had hoped for. Affliction, affliction for the purpose of refining and drawing them back to God, but nonetheless, not an answer they would have perhaps wished for. Often the answer is strength to confront the trial.

We quoted just a moment ago from Psalm 138, the very day that I cried out, you answered me. And what does the psalmist go on to say? He goes on to say, I think this is the language of the AV, and you strengthen me with strength in my soul. So, the answer was actually the grace, the strength to confront the trial, not the removal of the trial, not something perhaps dramatic in that sense, but the spiritual resources to confront the situation that the psalmist was in, the crisis, whatever it might have been.

So, to draw things to a close as we think about this promise directed to Judah that we're drawing and owning for ourselves. O people of Zion who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious He will be when you cry for help. We can claim this promise, but let us approach God as we ought, humbly and sincerely, and let us listen and recognize and accept the answer the Lord graciously determines to give us. And so, maybe we can, and I think we can legitimately, you know, paraphrase the words of verse 19 and direct them to ourselves. O believers of Bon Accord who live in Aberdeen, you will weep no more. How gracious He will be when you cry for help. As soon as He hears, He will answer you." Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You that You are indeed a God who hears us. Surely,

Your arm has not shortened that it cannot save, and Your ear too dull to hear. And so, as we pray now, we do so in the confidence, in the assurance that You hear us and that You answer us. We acknowledge how often we approach You in a manner that we ought not to. We cherish sin in our heart. We approach You with pride and self-sufficiency, and our experience in those circumstances will be the experience of the psalmist, that You do not listen. Help us then to come in all our imperfections, but to come sincerely and humbly, seeking Your help. And as we do, be assured that as soon as You hear, You answer us. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going to...