

“Who to Trust: Egypt or the Lord?”

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Isaiah 30

Do Not Go Down to Egypt

¹ “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;

² 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!

³ Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame,
and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation.

⁴ For though his officials are at Zoan
and his envoys reach Hanes,

⁵ everyone comes to shame
through a people that cannot profit them,
that brings neither help nor profit,
but shame and disgrace.”

⁶ 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.

⁷ Egypt's help is worthless and empty;
therefore I have called her
“Rahab who sits still.”

A Rebellious People

⁸ 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.

⁹ For they are a rebellious people,
lying children,
children unwilling to hear
the instruction of the LORD;

¹⁰ 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,

¹¹ leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

¹² Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,
“Because you despise this word
and trust in oppression and perverseness
and rely on them,

¹³ 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;

¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel,
“In returning^[c] and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”

But you were unwilling, ¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

The LORD Will Be Gracious

¹⁸Therefore 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.

¹⁹For 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. ²⁰And 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. ²¹And 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. ²²Then 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!"

²³And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, ²⁴and the oxen and the donkeys that work the ground will eat seasoned fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. ²⁵And on every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. ²⁶Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the LORD binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

²⁷Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar,
burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke;
his lips are full of fury,
and his tongue is like a devouring fire;
²⁸his breath is like an overflowing stream
that reaches up to the neck;

to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction,
and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray.

²⁹You shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel. ³⁰And the LORD will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones. ³¹The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the LORD, when he strikes with his rod. ³²And every stroke of the appointed staff that the LORD lays on them will be to the sound of tambourines and lyres. Battling with brandished arm, he will fight with them. ³³For a burning place^[a] has long been prepared; indeed, for the king it is made ready, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of sulfur, kindles it.

- Isaiah 30, ESV

When We Need Help! What Kind of Help?

State Farm has been running commercials lately that feature people in trouble getting the wrong kind of help. In one, a homeowner whose house is flooding from a broken faucet says, “This is ludicrous!” and the rapper Ludacris shows up, only to realize they don’t need his rapping help, they need Jake from State Farm. In another, a father hands the keys to a car to his daughter, she says, “Are you joking? You must be joking,” and then Jimmy Fallon shows up. When you need help from your insurance company, you don’t need a rapper or a comedian.

As ridiculous as the premise of these commercials is, we have all found ourselves in situations where we need help, even situations that feel desperate and leave us desperate for help. In those moments, what kind of help do we think we need? We’ve been lulled into a very secular and pragmatic way of thinking that very easily marginalizes and sidelines God and His word to the peripheral and unimportant matters of life. So, we go to church and read our Bibles and pray so we can feel better and have hope, but then we live the practical matters of our lives as if the Bible has nothing helpful to say about them. We either aren’t aware of what God says to us in His Word or else we simply don’t want to hear it. Turning to the Bible and to prayer for wisdom in our practical needs can sometimes feel as useful as having Jimmy Fallon show up to tell jokes or Ludacris show up to rap – a nice distraction, perhaps, but not really helpful in the moment.

For Jerusalem and Judah, they were facing the very real and immanent threat of invasion by the Assyrian army. They were outnumbered and in imminent danger. They needed help, and they needed it yesterday. God has reassured them through His word from Isaiah that the Assyrians would not succeed, that the Lord would protect and deliver His people. But trusting the word of a prophet who claims to be speaking the Word of God seemed awfully shaky and unreliable to the people of Jerusalem and Judah. They wanted help that had more horsepower behind it. They wanted Egypt.

Going to Egypt for Help, vv. 1-7

The key thing to keep in mind about Judah seeking help from Egypt is that they did seek the Lord first and ask Him if this is what they should do. Most likely, they didn't do this because they knew what the Lord's answer would be.

¹ *“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;
² 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!
³ Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame,
and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation.
⁴ For though his officials are at Zoan
and his envoys reach Hanes,
⁵ everyone comes to shame
through a people that cannot profit them,
that brings neither help nor profit,
but shame and disgrace.”*

⁶ *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.
7 Egypt's help is worthless and empty;
therefore I have called her
"Rahab who sits still."*

The word from the Lord here opens with an interesting satirical pun, found in the word “alliance” in verse 1 – “who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit.” This word for alliance is a very interesting Hebrew word that can also be translated as covering or blanket or as image or idol. In verse 22, when God says, “You will defile your carved idols,” it’s the same word as “alliance” here. And just a little while before this prophecy, in Isaiah 28:20, the word is used of a covering too narrow or short to effectively cover a man. What’s the point? The people of God have entered into an alliance without the Lord’s blessing or guidance, and they’re hoping it will be a covering for them, but instead it is an idol that they will later be ashamed of. When we seek out help or refuge in the things of the world without seeking the Lord, whatever we turn to will turn out to be inadequate and a snare for us spiritually.

The two things to know about the help of Egypt are that it was very expensive and that it was utterly useless. In the Bible, Egypt represents the false promises of the world, turning to the world for help, hope, and deliverance. The Bible uses two real civilizations as emblematic to represent the world: Babylon represents the world as it threatens to oppress and enslave God’s people. Egypt represents the world as it holds out false hope and empty promises to God’s people.

Worldliness among God’s people can come from either compromising with Babylon out of fear of from relying on Egypt in mis-placed faith. When the pressure of the world causes you to be tempted to deny Christ, to avoid persecution or ridicule, or makes you feel targeted for your faith, this is Babylon. And the word from the Lord to keep in mind when facing Babylon is “Do not fear!” But when the world is making promises of help and offering resources that seem to be the answers to our problems, this is Egypt, with ot chariots and horses. And the word of the Lord in the face of Egypt is, “Do not trust in chariots and horses. Do not look to Egypt. Look to the Lord!”

The strange “*oracle on the beasts of the Negeb* “ in verses 6-7 is a mocking critique of the treasure caravan that Judah sent to Egypt through the Negeb, the southern desert area between Judah and Egypt. It’s a dangerous wilderness and would not normally be the path to take, but the coastal road, which goes through Gaza and is much safer normally is

already under the control of the Assyrians. So, they take the risk of sending great treasure on beasts of burden through the desert wilderness. In the end, their expensive expedition is useless -

*Egypt's help is worthless and empty;
therefore I have called her
"Rahab who sits still."*

Another way to translate that last line is "Rahab the do-nothing." When God's people turn to the world for help, it's expensive and often leads to the idolatrous worship of the same things the world worships, and what does it really get us in the end? NOTHING.

Rebelling Against our Gracious God, vv. 8-17

And as we're chasing the world and its expensive empty promises, we are actively rebelling against our gracious God.

*⁸ 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.
⁹ For they are a rebellious people,
lying children,
children unwilling to hear
the instruction of the LORD;
¹⁰ 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,
¹¹ leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."*

Believers who are busy chasing the world's empty promises don't want to hear the Word of God. They just want to be told things that make them feel better. So many professing Christians in America today will bolt from a church as soon as they hear something that offends them, something they disagree with and don't want to hear.

The good news is that God loves His people. In fact, He is more committed to our eternal spiritual well-being than we are. When He sees us running after the world and its empty promises and refusing to hear His true word. In love, when we are being stubbornly rebellious, He will send affliction and disaster to break us of our idolatrous pursuit of the world and our rebellious rejection of Him -

¹² Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,

*“Because you despise this word
and trust in oppression and perverseness
and rely on them,*

¹³ 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;*

¹⁴ 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.”*

Verse 13 is the key to this whole image:

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*

When the stock market crashes or the housing market collapses or the latest economic bubble bursts, it comes suddenly. When elections go wrong or Supreme Court decisions come down, they can hit with a sudden and jolting shock. When you're building a house of cards and putting all your hope in it, it doesn't take much for it to all come tumbling down.

What do we really need in our moments of collapse or despair? God's answer and His gracious invitation come in verse 15 -

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.”*

This is exactly what we need to hear and what we don't want to hear in our anxious world-chasing desperation. We want God to tell us what we can do to fix our problems. He says "Return and rest. Be quiet and trust Me. Then, I will be your salvation and your strength." The solemn and committed nature of this invitation is seen in how God identifies Himself – "the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel." This is the only time this very full and rich title for God is used. He is the Lord, the Master and Ruler of His people. He is YaHWeH, the unchangeable and self-sufficient I AM, and He is the Holy One of Israel.

We need to know and really believe that what we need more than anything when we are facing a crisis is God Himself to be our salvation and our strength. Rejecting this call by God only leads to more disaster for God's people, as spelled out in verses 16-17. When we run from God, we run from our only true help.

Hearing God's Gracious Promise, vv. 18-30

Despite His people's repeated rejections of Him, God graciously tells them in verse 18 –

*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.*

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² 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!"

God's grace perseveres in the lives of His people, and He patiently draws us back to Himself. We're not going to have time to go through the rest of this chapter in detail today. We'll pick it up and work it into next week's message. I think we should close by carefully considering and hearing the Lord's gracious call to us in verses 15 & 18 again –

*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.”*

*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.*

So often, when we're in distress, we think our circumstances need to change. We call on God to change our circumstances to what we think they need to be, and when He doesn't answer quickly enough, we go searching for a solution from the world.

God is waiting for us to see that what we need is not a change of circumstances but a change of heart. Corrie ten Boom was the only member of her family to survive the German occupation of the Netherlands and the Holocaust. Her father dies shortly after they were arrested by the Nazis, and her sister, Betsie, died in Ravens Bruck concentration camp. Corrie learned in Ravens Bruck that God's love reaches and comforts His people anywhere, in any circumstance. She said, "I've experienced his presence in the deepest darkest hell that men can create . . . I have tested the promises of the Bible, and believe me, you can count on them."

Matt Redmond is a Christian counselor at a PCA church in Alabama and a Facebook friend of mine. Each week, he publishes "Random Thoughts for the Weekend." Here are the first three he posted for this weekend –

1. Rejoicing in suffering does not mean you're happy in suffering. It means you have a sense of well-being because of the promise of the King. You know you're going to be more than okay.
2. I was reading that section of John where Jesus says, "I am the bread of life," and it struck me forcefully how confident Jesus was in the knowledge he had of himself. And then it struck me that's the same confidence we can have in him.
3. The thing is never the problem, it's how we think about the thing and therefore how we orient our will as a result that's the problem.

We run to Egypt for help when we lose our sense of well-being because of our confidence in the promise of the King. We forget that it's going to be more than okay. We run to Egypt for help because we lose the confidence that we have in Jesus alone. We forget that the thing we're facing is never itself the actual problem, but how we think about the thing we're facing.

If we begin with confidence in the Lord and His promises and in our secure identity in Christ, we will see very clearly that anything we face in this life is small and temporary. As the Apostle Paul said, *"This light, momentary affliction is working for us a weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."* (2 Corinthians 4:17-18) None of us would ever call the things the Apostle Paul endured *"light, momentary affliction,"* but he knew they were because he kept His eyes on Christ and eternity.

The consequences of taking our eyes off of Jesus and eternity is that we will inevitably start looking to Egypt for the things our flesh and the world have convinced us we need. And that will be inadequate cover and rebellious idolatry, and will bring absolutely no help and lots of harm.

We can learn from Isaiah and Paul and Corrie ten Boom and so many others to keep our eyes where they need to be –

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." – Hebrews 12:1-2, ESV