

TCC Sunday 13th July 2014 – A trajectory for return to God – Isaiah 31

Title: “A trajectory for return to God”

Purpose: To see how God opens a way for his drifting people to move away from tragedy onto a different return trajectory.

INTRODUCTION

Green & Blacks

Illustration about chocolate bars with a grading from bitter to sweeter and how one of the very sweetest things in life is a relationship restored – when one party returns to another and there is a lovely restoration of a deep friendship that had suffered some sort of rift or breakage.

And here today our keyword for Isaiah 31 is that word RETURN.

Isaiah is building up to a great climax, to a great appeal at Verse 6 where he says:

“Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites.”

And to make this appeal all the clearer and to make sure that it really strikes its target with full force, he goes over, one more time, the ground that he has covered in the previous chapter.

So it is helpful to realise that Isaiah chapter 31 is, in many ways, a more compact and a more focussed version of the key lessons that were covered in Isaiah chapter 30.

Q. So why does Isaiah bother doing that?

Q. Why bother saying something once and then kind of repeating yourself?

Well, I think it is because the people he was speaking to were at this stage quite hard of hearing and so they needed things being spelt out more than once.

And let’s face it:

Q. Are we not just the same ourselves?

Q. How many of us are perhaps habitually, at this point in our lives, too distant from God to be hearing well?

Quite possibly many of us need the quickening of the Spirit of God and the relentless prodding of the Word of God to go with that.

The background

Just to remind ourselves of the situation that was prevailing at the time (and I do this not because you haven’t heard it before but partly just to try and embed these things more deeply in you – and also because they help us to be clearer about the atmosphere of things at the time):

- Isaiah covers a number of kings of Judah, and by the time we get to the final chapter of Isaiah you’ll be able to trot the names off without even thinking.

There was King Uzziah and then Jotham (a good King that we don't learn anything about here), then Ahaz (a bad King, for whom we have quite a large section dedicated to him) and now we are looking at the last of the four kings which is Hezekiah.

- Now Hezekiah was, in the main, a good King, BUT (and there is always a BUT), he was **A MAN UNDER CONSIDERABLE PRESSURE**.

The Assyrians were a very great military force and they were a very present threat and so Hezekiah was surrounded by people who were clamouring for him to take action by making alliances with neighbouring EGYPT.

- By the time we get to Isaiah 31 here, **Samaria** (the capital city of the Northern Kingdom) has been defeated and the people carted off. (That was 722BC)
- About 8 years later on Sennacherib (King of Assyria) has swept in and **captured the main cities of Judah**.
- A couple of years further on the Philistines to the West have also fallen (centred on their northernmost city **ASHDOD**) and the Egyptians were precisely zero use to them – when push came to shove.
- So now Hezekiah is a man who finds himself between a rock and a hard place.

Q. You ever been there?

Perhaps the reality is that, (if the truth be known), you are kind of in that situation around about 's now!

Our structure

I want to divide this chapter into just a couple of chunks.

And actually it is quite a concise, "pint-sized" chapter with just 9 verses – (and that is quite refreshing compared to the last chapter we did, where we had a whopping 33 verses to do).

- The first section will be Verses 1 to 3 and what I'm calling:
FACTORING GOD OUT OF THE EQUATION
- Then Verses 4 to 9 and:
FACTORING GOD BACK INTO THE EQUATION

So then here we go:

1] Verses 1-3: FACTORING GOD OUT OF THE EQUATION

And to help us make sense of these opening verses I want to start by drawing on the NT and the apostle Peter.

He was one who has given us 2 letters:

- **the first letter** (that is 1 Peter) he writes to people going through **TOUGH TIMES**:

1 Peter chapter 4 verse 16 “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the **painful trial** you are **suffering**, as though something strange were happening to you.”

- **the second letter** (so that’s 2 Peter) is written to people that are being **MIS-ADVISED**, people being led into “**BY-PATH MEADOW**” as **John Bunyan** described it in **Pilgrim’s Progress**.

And he says: 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 1 “Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them **as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking.**”

And one of Peter’s favourite words that he uses in these 2 letters is the word **PRECIOUS**.

***** HOW EASY IT IS TO LOSE SIGHT OF THAT WHICH IS TRULY PRECIOUS. *****

2 Peter 1 Verse 3&4 “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own **glory** and **goodness**. Through these he has given us his **VERY GREAT AND PRECIOUS PROMISES**, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

Clichés not enough

You see **clichés** - those kind of **stock phrases** and **throwaway truisms about life** - which in reality have no real depth - are simply not scalable when it comes to facing real life situations and difficulties that may loom large.

For this we need Jesus – as that **Graham Kendrick** song goes:

For the joys and for the sorrows	(Verse 1 of 3)
The best and worst of times	
For this moment, for tomorrow	
For all that lies behind	
Fears that crowd around me	
For the failure of my plans	
For the dreams of all I hope to be	
The truth of what I am	
	(Chorus)
<i>For this I have Jesus For this I have Jesus For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus</i>	
For the tears that flow in secret	(Verse 2 of 3)
In the broken times	
For the moments of elation	
Or the troubled mind	
For all the disappointments	
Or the sting of old regrets	
All my prayers and longings	
That seem unanswered yet	

As one commentator says on this passage (**Ray Ortlund Jr.** – Preaching the Word Commentary):

“We need God. If we factor him out of the equation, we strip ourselves bare before the blast of life’s cruelties...
...God has made commitments to us (these are the precious promises):

For example:

- Psalm 32 Verse 8 ESV “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”
- John 14 Verse 3 “I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”
- 2 Corinthians 12 Verse 9 “My grace is sufficient for you...”
- Genesis 15 Verse 1 “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

I wonder:

Q. Do these sort of promises and commitments of God – naturally trip off your tongue (and I don’t mean you have to be able to quote chapter and verse)?

Q. Are these the sort of things that flow through your spiritual veins?

The truth might be that we have developed spiritual “poor circulation”.

Q. What were they doing?

Q. So what were they doing?

Well they were doing what God had told them they were never to do and that is go back to **Egypt** again.

If you look at it from God’s point of view, (which we rarely tend to do), – God had gone to very dramatic extents to retrieve His people from the slavery and bondage of Egypt:

- he raised up a deliverer via 40 years of training in the very family of Pharaoh himself
Followed up by another 40 year MBA in the training college of that hidden campus in the desert of Midian
- he then sent no less than 10 plagues to force the Egyptians to release them from their slave-labour
- he then did the most outstanding of miracles in the OT – the EXODUS across the Red Sea
- and if that wasn’t enough – he kept them for 40 years in the desert forming them into a nation equipped with spiritual laws, with a priesthood and a functioning place of worship (the tabernacle)

Hence Verse 1&2 read: “**WOE** (OR alas OR how tragic!) to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD.

Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words. He will rise up against the house of the wicked, against those who help evildoers.”

Hard to relate to this?

It can sometimes be hard to relate to such a notion as going back to Egypt, because not many of us would really feel much desire to get our hands on say a chariot.

But we need to remember that at a spiritual level **EGYPT is a code word for THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD.**

JUST AS the Israelites were drawn back there – **SO TOO**, we are drawn back to the **WORLD** from which we have been saved and redeemed at immeasurable cost.

It is actually quite easy to see the mapping – it's has a very ready parallel to our own ways and thinking:

- **“RELYING ON HORSES”** – horses were known for their strength, for their **POWER**

Q. Do we not feel drawn to things in this world that seem to have power and clout behind them?

- **“TRUSTING IN THE MULTITUDE OF THEIR CHARIOTS”** – NUMBERS MATTER!!

IF we can just distribute to all of the 25,000 people in Thatcham invitation cards – **THEN** people are bound to come into the church.

IF only my pay packet was £5,000 more every year **THEN** I would be happy.

IF only we can have 25 people here in church every Sunday morning **THEN** we will have MADE IT!!

Q. And what did the CHARIOT actually represent in that day?

Well it was simply the latest, “must have” technology. It was a case of: plenty of horsepower up front and at the rear, room for 3 – a driver, an archer and spearsman. That was some nice piece of kit!!

Q. Do you ever find yourself pinning your desires and hopes on the latest and the greatest?

- **“THE HORSEMEN”** – these were very desirable because of their flexibility, because of their capability. These were the equivalent of having the marines on hand – and translating that into our own day – this is where we put a lot of emphasis on those who have training and expertise.

Q. Ever put your hope and your dependence upon those who are called consultants – upon people with letters after their names who have offices in the expensive places of our towns and cities?

And while they taking their excursion back down to EGYPT – they do ***NOT*** consider it PRACTICAL to consult the Holy One of Israel.

Holy One of Israel

As I've mentioned before Isaiah likes to use “THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL” as another name for the LORD.

This name gets used 32 times in the OT – and only 5 are clearly beyond the realms of Isaiah.

Q. Why does Isaiah favour this name so much?

Well I would imagine it was because early on, when God commissioned him as a prophet, He graciously gave him a life-changing vision of the GLORY, THE GREATNESS and the sheer HOLINESS of God.

Remember what he heard in the temple, when he had that vision – the Seraphim crying out:

(Isaiah 6 verse 3) “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is the LORD Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Question: Q. What will STEM THE TIDE of your tendency to go back to EGYPT, to go back to the WORLD – for your PLEASURE, your POWER and ultimately for your PURPOSE?

Answer: **ONLY** a sight of the true **glory** and **holiness** and **loveliness** of our God and Saviour.

Their actions are REBELLION

NOW - this chapter, here in Isaiah 31 does not suggest that their actions are understandable under the circumstances – rather it reveals that they have lost connection with their spiritual head and that they are in open rebellion.

As Verse 6 says “...you have **so greatly revolted...**”.

Verse 3 says “But the Egyptians are **men** and **not God**; their horses are **flesh** and **not spirit**.
When the Lord stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together.”

The reason they are going backwards and going back to Egypt and place their hopes and reliance there is because they are no longer seeing God in a true light.

The God they have –(because let us be clear – they have not completely given up on God) – is no longer very big in their sight. God has shrunk.

Q. Why has He shrunk? Because He is afar off from them, from their minds and their thinking.

I want to head into the next section because it is particularly important that we can see the biblical solution to this age old problem of getting sucked back into Egypt and placing our trust and real dependence upon things that cannot really deliver us.

So we’ve looked at the opening Verses – (and these have very much re-echoed how the previous chapter started out) – which is what we called: #1 FACTORING GOD OUT OF THE EQUATION

Now #2:

2] Verses 4-9: FACTORING GOD BACK INTO THE EQUATION

This is where we really need to address the most practical of questions:

Q. When God feels UNREAL in the very real crises of our lives –
and when we are tempted to make our way down to Egypt – how do we find our way back?

Well you may have heard of Jonathan Edwards – and no I’m not thinking of the famous triple jumper – this Jonathan Edwards was a church minister during a great time of religious revival in the 18th Century in America.

And he wrote many very helpful works which people read to this day. And one of those is called “The religious affections” in which he explained that there were a couple of levels at which we know God:

- firstly at the level of the THOUGHTS OF OUR MINDS
- secondly and more importantly is the level of THE SENSE ON OUR HEARTS

And before you say – I don’t have a clue what you’re really on about – let me just explain what that means:

- the difference between the THOUGHTS OF OUR MINDS and the SENSE ON OUR HEARTS can be illustrated by thinking about HONEY.

It is one thing to have been told about HONEY that it is sweet

But it is something entirely different to know, to have the SENSE OF HONEY on your tongue.

- It is one thing to be told that the smell of freshly baked bread is gorgeous – it is another to actually walk into a bakery when the shop opens at 7 in the morning to be greeted by that pleasure-inducing smell in your nostrils.

This second part of Isaiah 31 builds up to a strong call to RETURN – it is there in Verse 6:

(Verse 6) “Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites.”

And this is so very characteristic of our God – He has so many opportunities, so many reasons why He might say I want nothing more to do with you and yet time and time against – he is LONGING for us to return, he is WAITING and WOOING us to return to him and enjoy a full and fruitful relationship with him.

Remember that that was the pattern of chapter 30 – we had the 3 headings:

- a WAYWARD people – they were actively heading off down to EGYPT
- a FORWARD God – who was equally rising to show compassion and longing to be gracious to them
- and a GODWARD challenge – God laid before them the beauty and excellence of the gospel

Isaiah 30v15 “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength...”

Factoring God back

Now I want to be practical ...

...and we haven't come to Isaiah just to read a big book and pat ourselves on the back that we have successfully made our way through THE LARGEST BUT ONE book of the Bible based on numbers of chapters.

(5 Longest Books in the Bible:

1. Psalms -- 150 chapters, 2461 verses, 43,743 words
2. Jeremiah -- 52 chapters, 1364 verses, 42,659 words
3. Exekiel -- 48 chapters, 1273 verses, 39,407 words
4. Genesis -- 50 chapters, 1533 verses, 38,267 words
5. Isaiah -- 66 chapters, 1292 verses, 37,044 words)

“A Tragedy” + “A Trajectory”

Let's be clear this chapter takes on the status of a **WOE**.

This chapter has written all over it “**TRAGEDY IN THE MAKING**”.

However – at the same time God writes just as clearly “**TRAJECTORY IN THE MIDST**” – by which I simply mean that God all the while is supplying a way of escape – it is as though God, in His supreme mercy and longsuffering grace has built-in an ejector button which can be pressed when things are particularly dire.

So then back to our question:

Q. When God feels UNREAL in the very real crises of our lives – and when we are tempted to make our way down to Egypt – how do we find our way back?

And God, there in Verses 4&5 and then in Verses 7-9 gives us **TWO SUBSTANTIAL HANDHOLDS**:

- In Verses 4&5 – we have **some pictures**
- In Verses 7-9 – we have **some promises**

Let's take them in turn.

PICTURE #1 - THE LION - Verse 4

*** READ Verse 4 ***

A lion's roar – if you hear one close up – is not one you will forget:

- At a distance of 1 metre it can reach 114 decibels which (just in case you don't immediately know how loud that is) is greater than the noise of a pneumatic drill that people use on the road to break up the concrete.
- The roar is so loud that you can actually hear it up to 5 miles away!

The point being **THIS IS YOUR GOD**.

Just as Aslan the lion in CS Lewis's "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" this is the way Mr Beaver puts it to the children:

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Let me ask you:

Q. Are you frequently running scared?

- scared of people who are perhaps in positions above you
- scared of worrying circumstances
- scared of the unknown
- scared of not getting what you think you need to have to be happy

Your God is the LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH.

This reality is a "dismay-buster" – as Revelation 5 Verse 5 says:

"Do not weep! See, **the Lion of the tribe of Judah**, the Root of David, has triumphed."

Now if this first picture or simile is a bit of a male-type image then the second one in verse 5 is more female:

PICTURE #2 - A HOVERING BIRD - Verse 5

*** READ Verse 5 ***

Now we need to be clear here that these images are meant to be positive ones – we are not intended here to

see birds of prey that are circling around a potential victim below.

In the world wars cities were protected by great balloons that they would float into the skies – these were the BARRAGE BALLOONS or BLIMPS as they called them. They were a very effective cover.

And our God HOVERS over us, just as an eagle hovers above her chicks able to swoop down at any moment to ward off any that would seek to attack or harm them.

Notice where it says: “...he will shield it and deliver it, he will ‘pass over’ it and rescue it.”

Q. Did you wonder why the NIV has put “pass over” in quote?

Well it is simply that the word there in the Hebrew (paw-sach) (where it has the same type of meaning) only occurs elsewhere in Exodus in relation to the passover (In Exodus 12).

Our God passes over *NOT* to destroy BUT to protect.

Q. Have you gained the sense on your heart that you have the most masculine of fathers and the most feminine of mothers?

Let’s go on to the PROMISES:

PROMISE #1 – Verse 7

*** READ Verse 7 ***

He is promising them that a day is going to dawn when they will no longer be dogged by their evil idols.

We can be very defeatist in our thinking, we can easily believe Satan’s lie that we will never be able to shake off the shackles of sin. Satan likes us to believe that we are still slaves to sin and that the cell doors are still locked so that we cannot get out.

But as 1 Corinthians 10 Verse 13 says:

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

PROMISE #2 – Verses 8-9

*** READ Verse 8-9 ***

Here Assyria is named just so as to connect us back to real history – lest we think that this is somewhat academic and unreal – and the enemy is going to be defeated.

The important point to notice here is the manner in which this defeat comes – it is “...not of man; a sword not of mortals...” which means that when push comes to shove, that Judah will not have to actually do anything because God will be doing the fighting for them.

I guess you cannot get much more re-assurance than that.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude.

This chapter is, like its longer cousin in chapter 30, making it clear that it is TRAGIC when people lose the sense of God on their hearts and head back to EGYPT, to the WORLD will everything that it offers.

But there is a TRAJECTORY out and away from that TRAGEDY and that comes in the form of the CLIMACTIC Verse 6:

Verse 6 “Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites.”

Q. Are you actually in REVOLT this morning?

Of course nobody is actually going to have the honesty and transparency to call it that – except the Word of God that is.

Penitence

Time and again God sets us up for penitence.

Let me close with the words from the next prophet down the historical chain:

Jeremiah 3 verses 12-14 “ **Return, faithless Israel,**’ declares the Lord, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,’ declares the Lord,

‘I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt—

you have rebelled against the Lord your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,’ ” declares the Lord.

“Return, faithless people,” declares the Lord, “for I am your husband. I will choose you...