

God is Gracious

Isaiah 30

If you were here last Sunday, you know that Andrew Campbell spoke on sin. He painted a pretty clear picture for how bad sin is and how desperate our situation is because of it. All of us and every part of us has been infected by sin. We have all rebelled against God. And because of this we are spiritually dead. For those who weren't here, let me just read one of the passages he read that does a pretty good job of summing up our situation.

Ephesians 2:1-3 says:

¹ And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, ² in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³ Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

This is not a pretty picture. And when you hold this picture up to the truth that God is a holy God, without Christ we are in a desperate situation. We need help. What we really need is grace. The good news that I want us to look at this morning as we continue our sermon series on *God is . . .* is the truth that God is a gracious God.

J.I. Packer's defines God's grace this way. He says:

The grace of God is love freely shown towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity, and had no reason to expect anything but severity (Knowing God, 120).

Because of our sin, we deserve only severity. We deserve only God's judgment. But because of His grace, God freely shows us love contrary to our merit and in defiance to our demerit.

This morning we are going to spend most of our time in Isaiah 30. Sometimes people tend to think that grace is something that showed up in the New Testament, but it is all over the Old Testament as well. As we have seen, God is an unchanging God and so grace has always been an essential part of His nature.

While you are turning to Isaiah 30, let me give you some of the background. Isaiah was a prophet who ministered in Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah – Kings of Judah. In 745 BC, Assyria began to grow in power and began to conquer surrounding nations. In 722, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. As the threat against Judah grew greater so too did the temptation for Judah to turn to

other surrounding nations for protection rather than God. Egypt was one such nation. That's the context of Isaiah 30.

And so the prophecy begins in verse 1:

¹ *"Woe to the rebellious children," declares the LORD,
"Who execute a plan, but not Mine,
And make an alliance, but not of My Spirit,
In order to add sin to sin;
² Who proceed down to Egypt
Without consulting Me,
To take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh
And to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!"*

God calls His people *the rebellious children*. They were rebelling against Him in their plans. He says that they *execute a plan, but not Mine*. The plan that they were seeking to execute was to *make an alliance* with Egypt. They were looking to Egypt for *refuge* and *shelter*. But this was not God's will.

God tells them that what they are seeking – safety – will actually turn out for their shame. Verse 3:

³ *"Therefore the safety of Pharaoh will be your shame
And the shelter in the shadow of Egypt, your humiliation.
⁴ "For their princes are at Zoan
And their ambassadors arrive at Hanes.
⁵ "Everyone will be ashamed because of a people who cannot profit
them, Who are not for help or profit, but for shame and also for reproach."*

If they are to trust in Egypt, what they will actually find instead of *safety* is *shame* and instead of *shelter* they will find *humiliation*. Turning to Egypt for assistance against the Assyrians is not God's will for them.

In verses 6 and 7, Isaiah visualizes emissaries from Hezekiah being sent to Egypt carrying *riches* and *treasures* to secure Egypt's help. But again, God says that Egypt will not be able to help. Their help, He says, *is vain and empty* (v. 7). And then in verse 9, God says:

⁹ *For this is a rebellious people, false sons,
Sons who refuse to listen
To the instruction of the LORD;
¹⁰ Who say to the seers, "You must not see visions";
And to the prophets, "You must not prophesy to us what is right,
Speak to us pleasant words,
Prophesy illusions."*

¹¹ *“Get out of the way, turn aside from the path,
Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”*

God again calls Judah a *rebellious people*. They are *false sons . . . who refuse to listen to the instruction of the LORD*. They actually try to silence the prophets. They don't want to be warned. They simply want to hear *pleasant words*. They reject God's true prophets. In reality they are rejecting God Himself. They say *Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel* (11).

But Isaiah does not bow to the wishes of the people to stop speaking about the Holy One of Israel. Rather, he goes right on declaring God's word to them. Verse 12:

¹² *Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,
“Since you have rejected this word
And have put your trust in oppression and guile,
and have relied on them,*

Instead of listening to God's word they have *rejected* it. When it says that they have *put their trust in oppression and guile*, this is probably a reference to Egypt. And since this is what they choose to do, God warns what will happen. Verse 13:

¹³ *Therefore this iniquity will be to you
Like a breach about to fall,
A bulge in a high wall,
Whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant,
¹⁴ Whose collapse is like the smashing of a potter's jar,
So ruthlessly shattered
That a sherd will not be found among its pieces
To take fire from a hearth
Or to scoop water from a cistern.”*

The point is that Judah's trust in another nation for protection instead of God would be her downfall. The imagery here is of the city's walls being breached and completely collapsing leaving the city unprotected.

As we come to verse 15, the Lord speaks to the people through Isaiah regarding where their salvation would come:

¹⁵ *For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said,
“In repentance and rest you will be saved,
In quietness and trust is your strength.”
But you were not willing,*

Repentance here literally means, “returning.” Turning away from Egypt and returning to the Lord is where they would find salvation. Trusting God is where they would find their

strength. But unfortunately, they *were not willing* to turn to the Lord and trust Him. Rather they would flee to Egypt for help. Verse 16:

*¹⁶ And you said, "No, for we will flee on horses,"
Therefore you shall flee!
"And we will ride on swift horses,"
Therefore those who pursue you shall be swift.
¹⁷ One thousand will flee at the threat of one man;
You will flee at the threat of five,
Until you are left as a flag on a mountain top
And as a signal on a hill.*

They would flee to Egypt for help, but instead of protection, what they would find would be overwhelming defeat. *One thousand will flee at the threat of one man.*

In spite of God's warning, Judah was bound and determined to trust Egypt rather than God. They closed their ears to God's messenger. They hardened their hearts against God's words. They rejected the One True God who loved them and who had the power to deliver them. You might think that to such a nation, God would say, "I am done with you. You reject Me. You reject my messengers. You are full of rebellion. I'm done. I will delight to see your downfall."

It is possible that you might think that God feels this way towards you. There are ways that you have refused to listen to Him. There are ways that you have rebelled against Him. You've turned to this thing or that thing to try to make life work for you, but you have not turned to God. There are ways that you have not been obeying Him. You have not been trusting Him. And you feel like God must be done with you.

It may be that what I've described has been true of your whole life. Sure, maybe you've attended church or been around some Christian activities here and there, but you know in your heart that you have never submitted your life to God. You've never really listened to God. And you feel like God must be done with you.

Or it may be that there was a time when you really did trust God with your life, but you've turned away from that. This was certainly the pattern for Judah throughout her history. Trust God, but later turn from that trust. That's what you've done. Over time you've little by little turned away from God. You know that there is a kind of rebellion in your heart towards God and His ways. You know that you've been hardening your heart against God. You know that you have not really been listening to His word. And you feel that surely God is ready to be done with you.

Is that God's heart towards you? Was that God's heart towards Judah in their rebellion? Verse 18 begins with a transitional word, *therefore*. You might expect that in light of Judah's behavior it would say, "Therefore I'm ready to be done with you." You would think that's how God would feel towards Judah . . . and towards you if you've been rebellious towards God. But that's not what it says. Verse 18:

*¹⁸ Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you,
And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you.
For the LORD is a God of justice;
How blessed are all those who long for Him.*

The LORD longs to be gracious to you. In context, the statement is almost shocking. If we knew nothing of God, this would not be what we would expect. But because God is a gracious God He shows love freely towards guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. That's what He is expressing to Judah. This is who God is. This is God's heart towards His rebellious people. Grace. *He waits on high to have compassion on [them].* God is so ready to be gracious and compassionate to His people. This is what His heart longs to express towards them . . . and to us, if we would only turn to Him.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, He is also a God of justice. And so whatever may come to Judah at the hands of Assyria for Judah's rebellion would be just. But at a heart level, God longs *to be gracious* to them. He is a God of grace. This is His nature. Grace is not something that just showed up on the scene when Jesus entered the world. God always has been and always will be a God of grace.

When God proclaimed his name before Moses in that Exodus 34:6 passage that we looked at a few weeks ago He said:

"The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth;

Psalms 116:5 says:

*Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God is compassionate.*

You see a list of a bunch of other verses at the bottom of your sermon outline that affirm that God is a gracious God. This is His nature.

Now, in the Isaiah passage He continues to speak to the people of Jerusalem about His grace. Verse 19:

¹⁹ O people in Zion, inhabitant in Jerusalem, you will weep no longer. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.

Yes, they have been rebellious. Yes, they have trusted foreign nations and not God. Yes, they have refused to listen to God. Yes, they have tried to silence God's messengers. What they deserve is judgment. But God says that at the first sound of their cry to Him He will *surely be gracious* to them. He *will answer* them. If they will repent and

turn back to God, He will be gracious to them. We won't take the time to look at it, but as the passage continues, Isaiah proclaims all the ways that God will pour out His grace on them in the future.

God is a God of grace. And how desperately we all need God's grace. This episode in the life of Judah is the story of each one of our lives. We have all been rebellious. We have all sinned against a holy God. We have done things that we should not do and we have not done things that we should do. And because of our sin we deserve only God's severity. But because God is a God of grace He delights to show love towards guilty sinners, contrary to our merit in defiance of our demerit.

I mentioned before that if we knew nothing of God, the transition in Isaiah 30:18 where God expresses how He longs to be gracious to Judah is really surprising. In the same way, if we read on in the Ephesians 2 passage that I read earlier you find a similar transition that would surprise you if you knew nothing about God. In the first three verse of Ephesians 2 it talks about our sin and our desperate situation. But just like Isaiah 30:18, the Ephesians passage continues, not by pronouncing judgment, but God's grace. Look at verse 4:

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

What we all deserve, what is right and just and fair for our sin, is for God to condemn us. We are all guilty sinners before a holy God. But because it is God's nature to be gracious, He freely loves us, guilty sinners, contrary to our merit and in defiance to our demerit. This is His heart; He longs to be gracious to us. And at the first sign of our turning to Him in repentance and trust, His grace is lavished on us.

I want to suggest a couple of images that help us picture the nature of God and His grace. The first is the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus tells in Luke 15. Most of you know the story. The son turns his back on his father and asks for his inheritance and then leaves home and goes off to a far country where he wastes it all in sinful living. He eventually hits rock bottom and comes to his senses and decides to go home. He hopes his father will take him back as a hired hand. But how does the father receive him? He runs to him with open arms and embraces him and welcomes him back as his son. That's a picture of God. That is a picture of God's grace – ready to receive us with open arms when we turn back to him.

Here's the second image. There is a Crowder song that we sing call, *Oh How He Loves*. In that song there is a phrase that says, "If grace is an ocean, we're all sinking."

The point of the metaphor is that God's grace is vast and unending. But here's the thing, sometimes in life we choose to walk out of that ocean of grace. We make choices to live in rebellion – like Judah did; like the prodigal son did. We get out of that ocean and walk up onto the sandy beach. The only way to experience that ocean of grace again is to turn around. Repent. And whether we've walked away from the ocean for miles or just a few feet, as soon as we turn around that vast ocean of grace is right there for us to throw ourselves in again.

God is a God of grace. His grace is vast and limitless. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how deep or how ugly your sin is. It doesn't matter how long you've walked away from God in rebellion and disobedience, all you have to do to throw yourself upon His grace is to turn back to Him and God will lavish His grace upon you. Remember what God said to Judah? In *repentance and rest you will be saved* (30:15).

For those of you here this morning who are not yet followers of Jesus, it is possible that you've thought that you need to get your life cleaned up before you turn to God. The message of the Bible is that you cannot do that. You cannot do anything to earn God's love. God is infinitely holy and we are not. But, as the Ephesians' passage says, by grace you can be saved through faith. Jesus Christ went to the cross to pay for your sin and when you turn to God in repentance and faith, God forgives your sin and He credits Jesus' righteousness to you. He makes you alive together with Christ. All of this is simply a gift of grace. You can't earn it; you can only receive it by faith. Will you? In a few moments as I close in prayer, I want to give you an opportunity to do that.

For those of you who are already followers of Christ, here's my encouragement to you. Our struggle with sin is such that even though we are believers we still are so prone to wander away from God. We are prone to try to live life independent of God. You feel that at times don't you? Sometimes we can subtly begin to believe that though we entered a relationship with God only by grace, that we now maintain a good standing with God by our good works. We think that when we mess up, we need to work our way back into a good standing with God through some kind of track record of obedience. We can't do that. All we can do is repent. We need to be life-time repenters. We need to turn back to Him again and again and throw ourselves on His grace every time we wander from Him. He will always be there with open arms.

God is a God of grace . . . for ALL of us. His grace is vast and limitless.