

Forget Egypt...Remember God
Isaiah 30 – 32
by Dellena Ludwig

The days after Christmas culturally are full of decisions we must make. Do I keep this gift or take it back? Should I take down the Christmas decorations now or leave them up until after New Years Day? What should I throw out of my closet to make room for my new jacket? Do I keep this insurance, or should I change to get better coverage now that our son and daughter are driving? To make a good decision, we must weigh both sides and perhaps list the pros and cons. Then, we can make informed decision as to what choose what to do.

Our lesson today presents this decision-making scenario on a national level. However, the decision had already been made by the leaders of Israel and now the prophet Isaiah stepped forward in chapters 30 through 32 to provide the list of pros and cons that had not been considered; when it came to: Forgetting Egypt and Remembering God.

In our last lesson, we studied the first three of six woes God declared on Israel.

1. Isaiah 28:1: “Woe to that wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards ...to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine.” Samaria, capital of Northern Israel.
2. Isaiah 29:1: “Woe to you, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David settled!” Remember, Ariel was another name for Jerusalem, the capital of Southern Israel, or Judah.
3. Isaiah 29:15: “Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord.” The leaders of Israel were making their plans without consulting the Lord.

Now, as we progress into chapter 30, we will encounter two more ‘woes. First, hear woe number four: “‘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; who look for help to Pharaoh’s protection to Egypt’s shade for refuge.” [Isaiah 30:1,2]

Judah under King Ahaz had called upon Assyria to protect them from the combined attack of Northern Israel and Aram. He bribed Assyria with much gold and promised Judah would be their vassal if Assyria would just help them against this doubled foe.

Assyria did attack and conquer both Aram and Samaria. But Assyria demanded regular tribute from Judah from that point on. At the time of this writing, Isaiah challenged the failing King Ahaz about his decision to send an envoy to Egypt, seeking their strength to attempt to break free from the strict chains of tribute demanded by Assyria.

Isaiah vocalized the list of “cons” they should have considered before sending their ambassadors to Egypt. First, Isaiah listed that Pharaoh would put them to shame. “everyone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither help nor advantage but only shame and disgrace.” [Isaiah 30:5]

Israel always considered Egypt to be a strong, formidable nation. They had feared them since the Exodus. Their use of horses and chariots had given them a reputation as renowned

warriors. So, as the envoys traveled along the trade routes, with their donkeys packed with treasures to purchase Egypt's help, Judah's leaders relied on that reputation as a positive reason to seek this treaty to make them Judah's ally.

The "cons" of this decision were listed.

1. This decision was made without consulting the Lord.
2. Egypt was not as strong as Israel remembered.
3. Reliance on them would just bring them shame.

Sometimes we make rash decisions, hurried by our own desperation. We may invest or borrow without weighing the pros and cons, because we fear losing the narrow window of opportunity. It may seem like the best choice at the moment. Only closer scrutiny of the choices may reveal there was a better way, if only we had sought wise counsel.

Had Judah's rulers sought God's knowledge, they would have heard that reliance on Egypt as an ally would be no help at all. Isaiah revealed God's measure of Egypt's might in verse 7. The ambassadors traveled, "to Egypt, whose help is utterly useless. Therefore, I call her Rahab the Do-Nothing." [Isaiah 30:7]

The leaders of Israel hadn't contacted Isaiah before sending off this delegation. They had stopped seeking God's wisdom because the prophet chastised their sin. They preferred to have nothing to do with the true prophets. Instead, they cried, "Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel." [Isaiah 30:10, 11] But I love the fact that Isaiah continued to put the Holy One of Israel forefront in his prophesy!

However far from the Lord God the leaders wished to be, God still cared so much that He would challenge their decision making anyway! So, God spoke out, through Isaiah. "Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says: Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit, this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant." [Isaiah 30:12,13] There wouldn't be any help from this alliance. It would be a false hope that would simply implode on their nation.

Again, the Lord drove home His involvement. "This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.'" [Isaiah 30: 15]

It is easy to push forward into our mistakes rather than to admit we were wrong. Our pride, just like the pride Judah's leaders held onto, becomes the handles we refuse to let go of, even when we begin to realize we made a bad decision. Our loving Lord is just waiting to be our Help, if we would just repent from our pride and stubbornness.

The Lord challenged Judah's faith in the might of Egypt and the strength of their horses and chariots. The leaders reasoned that if things went badly, at least they could run away from Assyria on the horses, but Isaiah foretold that their only real help was in the Holy One they

rejected. “Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore, He will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” [Isaiah 30:18]

Since the leaders of Israel had rejected the Helper who would make all of the difference, they rejected the benefits that would result from doing things His way! It was difficult to face the threat of an Assyrian attack without fear and panic. In their panic Judah turned to Egypt. But what would be the result if they had turned toward the Holy One of Israel?

The first in the “pros” list is that the Lord God is gracious. “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. 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.’” [Isaiah 30:19-21]

The leadership was failing because they refused to listen to God’s words. They made their own plans and followed their own feelings. But God sent his prophets to guide the king and his advisors. God wanted them to be listening to His guidance, and walk, or make decisions following His word. But their own sinful habits motivated their choices rather than the wisdom of God’s word.

Hearing God’s voice comes from listening for it. Our memory verse reminds us that whether we turn to the right or to the left, our ears will hear His voice. I believe that the Scriptures speak forth His voice most loudly. He has recorded the way we should live. He has exemplified the lives of saints and sinners to show us the results of their choices.

But His Spirit also whispers God’s directions to us. When we have studied God’s Word, the Holy Spirit reminds us of what we have read. He fills our minds with that verse we hadn’t even remembered that we had memorized, which precisely gives us the direction we need. He also uses circumstances to guide us, some positive and some negative.

Adversity will often come because of God’s Justice. He loves us too much to leave us in our sinful habits. In His holiness, we will face the consequences of our sins with the goal of ridding us of such habits. But in His loving grace, He plans restoration for our lives, just as He planned for Israel.

The list of God’s generous restoration far outweighed the cons of ignoring His leading. Isaiah recounted those “pros” God would give, once Israel would turn away from their idols:

1. God will restore the bounty of the promised land agriculturally. (v.23, 24)
2. God will provide rain and rivers. (v. 25)
3. God will alter the mountains, moon and sun to heal His people. (v. 26)
4. God will bring judgment on the nations (v. 27, 28)
5. God will restore Israel to give Himself praise. (v.29)

The Holy One of Israel will bring about the demise of Assyria. In fact, He would destroy them even though Judah's leaders had chosen unwisely, to ally themselves with Egypt. "The voice of the Lord will shatter Assyria; with His rod He will strike them down. Every stroke the Lord lays on them with His punishing club will be to the music of timbrels and harps, as He fights them in battle with the blows of His arm." [Isaiah 30:31, 32]

The Lord God already established the demise of Assyria. The leaders of Judah should have asked His advice before sending their ambassadors to Egypt. But Isaiah announced the fifth "woe" next, in chapter 32, directed to those who put their trust in Egypt.

"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of 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." [Isaiah 31:1]

Notice the comparison and contrast between God as Judah's ally versus Egypt as an ally. Egyptians are mere mortals and not God. (v.3) God unlike mortal men, does not go back on His word. (v.2) Egyptians rely on their horses (v.3) but God will make even them to stumble and perish. (v.3)

Even though many armies may come against a mighty foe like Assyria, the stronger force will not be frightened off, just like shepherds can't make a lion run from its prey. (v. 4) But God will shield Zion and deliver it just as He spared Israel's first born during the first Passover. (v.5)

Such a comparison leaves no doubt that Judah should put their trust in the Lord God, and not in the nation of Egypt. Therefore, Isaiah charges Judah's leaders to trust God alone when they face Assyria. "Return, you Israelites, to the One you have so greatly revolted against. For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made." [Isaiah 31:6,7]

The fear currently posed by the evil nation of Assyria was real. Eyewitnesses of the fall of Samaria had run for refuge to Jerusalem. They had reported the atrocities this evil nation visited upon Northern Israel when they had waged war on them. This fear was the motivation for Judah's leaders to reach out to Egypt for help. Judah under its faithless kings had dived into the deep water of idolatry; worshiping every idol of the surrounding nations and turning their backs on the Holy One of Israel.

But it would be the Holy One of Israel who would defeat the ruthless armies of Assyria. "Assyria will fall by no human sword; a sword, not of mortals, will devour them. They will flee before the sword, and their young men will be put to forced labor." [Isaiah 31:8] The fulfillment of this promise by God to defeat Assyria, will be revealed in coming chapters.

The lesson we can learn from Judah's mistake is that, in making our decisions, it is most valuable to consider all that God has done for us in the past. Every time Israel had relied on God, He had faithfully provided for them. Every time I have called on God, He has been faithful to guide me and help me. So, I can take one more step in the direction He guides me to take this time, trusting He will again be faithful.

Even as we face the giants in our life, it helps us to look back on all the ways God had helped us in the past. He has guided us in financial decisions, helped us with medical issues, and faithfully answers our deepest questions. Therefore, we can definitely rely on His guidance in this present danger.

Ahaz had led his nation to rely on idols. He even adopted the gods of his enemies in Damascus because they had won battles against him. (2 Chronicles 28:23 ff) He had Uriah the priest make a replica of Assyria's altar to flatter Tiglath-Pileser by worshiping Assyria's gods.

The Holy One of Israel had shown Himself to be mighty and powerful in Israel's past. He fought battles to help them win against armies much stronger than that of Israel. But many had forgotten His might and power. Many had begun to rely on their own armies and armor and had shifted their faith to idols and the legends of their promises, which were never fulfilled.

Isaiah challenged Judah's trust in idols. He charged them, "Return you Israelites, to the One you have so greatly revolted against. For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made." [Isaiah 31:6,7] God saw a day when Israel would be done with their persistent idol worship.

"Then you will desecrate your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, 'Away with you!'" [Isaiah 30:22] - a graphic illustration indeed!

Israel had so easily been lured into idol worship. Even at the base of Mount Sinai, the people begged Aaron to make a golden calf. Through their history as a nation, they secretly adopted the idols of the nations they had supplanted in the Promised Land. After a while, that idol worship wasn't so subtle. Ahaz actually sacrificed one of his sons to Molech!

The enemies they now faced, first Assyria and next Babylonia were being used by the Holy One of Israel to begin a purification for them. Northern Israel, and later, Judah would be captured and taken to live in the land of their captors to cleanse God's chosen people of their desire to worship idols. At least seventy years in Babylon would be needed, but that desire to serve any god other than Jehovah would be chastised and God would turn their hearts, once again, back to the pure worship of the Lord God Almighty.

The Lord God had promised that a future King would one day rule over united Israel in His Name with holiness and righteousness. So again, God reminded Judah of this Promised One, contrasting Messiah with the foolish leaders who now ruled Jerusalem in disgrace.

1. Messiah would reign with justice (32:1) but currently, Jerusalem was giving fools their high respect. (v.5)
2. Messiah would protect those needing shelter (v.2) while false rulers spread ungodliness and error about the Lord. (v.6)
3. Messiah would provide streams of water to revive the dessert (v.3) while evil leaders leave the hungry empty by withholding water. (v.6)

4. Messiah would heal the blind, deaf and fearful (v.3) while evil leaders use wicked methods to destroy the poor with lies.

This simple comparison should have burned in the hearts of those who were bent on rejecting God. How empty were the promises of the unrighteous rulers! And yet, how compelling was the promise of the Righteous Ruler. The complete picture given of the unrighteous rulers of Isaiah's day should have been enough for the people to reject their idols and turn to the worship of the Holy One of Israel right there, and then!

However, there was still a segment of the population of Jerusalem who were putting pressure on the leaders to make these wrong choices, even though Isaiah reminded them of all the negative consequences their choices would bring. That segment was the wealthy women living in Jerusalem. God gave Isaiah another challenge aimed specifically at these women.

Isaiah revealed them in chapter 32, beginning in verse 9: "You women who are so complacent, rise up and listen to me you daughters who feel secure, hear what I have to say! In little more than a year you who feel secure will tremble; the grape harvest will fail, and the harvest of fruit will not come." [Isaiah 32:9,10]

Why would the wealthy daughters of Jerusalem be shaken when the grape harvest failed? Because the center of their contentment was their use of wine. Just like so many pampered members of our affluent families of today, these women depended on the drug of their day, wine. Although they themselves never walked the vineyards or worked to harvest the fruit, they depended on its availability for their comfort, and the buzz they received from drinking it.

Isaiah challenged these seekers of comfort. "Tremble you complacent women; shudder, you daughters who feel secure! Strip off your fine clothes and wrap yourselves in rags. Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields for the fruitful vines" [Isaiah 32:11, 12] Notice that here too, Isaiah uses the comparison of plenty versus deprivation.

As Dan pointed out in our last lesson, there is nothing in Scripture that condemns the drinking of wine. But anything that one holds as more precious to themselves than God is like an idol. These women were spending their wealth to live in luxury and indulgence. Their evenings with friends, drinking the best vintages occupied all of their attention.

These women had been so focused on their pleasures, that they didn't consider the fate soon to befall their city. Those who were secure in their wealth would shift from complacency to want; from fine clothes to rags of mourning; from security to loss. This beautiful, fortified city in which they lived would be destroyed and their fruitful land abandoned.

"The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watch tower will become a wasteland forever, the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks, till the Spirit is poured on us from on high." [Isaiah 32:14, 15a]

The prophet sees the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem. However, although he described desolation, this dire vision of the future was bracketed in hope. The phrase, "till the Spirit is

poured on us from on high,” introduced the promise of the restoration of Israel after the exile that loomed in their not-too-distant future.

God’s plan for Jerusalem encapsulated a people living in faith and a land blessed because of that faith; “...till the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. The Lord’s justice will dwell in the desert, his righteousness live in the fertile field. The fruit of that righteousness will be peace; its effect will be quietness and confidence forever.” [Isaiah 32:15-17]

The wealthy people of Jerusalem thought that their influence and wealth could protect them from the chaos of war. They pressured King Ahaz to seek the treaty with Egypt. They used their wealth to buffer themselves from the threat of Assyrian captivity. They thought their possessions would keep them comfortable until this aggression would blow over.

But in contrast, God reminded them that their position of comfort would easily turn into the distress of mourning. The wealth they were relying on would be taken by aggressors and they themselves would easily become slaves just as the poorer populations of the land would be enslaved.

However, the plan God had for Jerusalem was one of plenty. But this plan included a people who would live by His Spirit. “My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys’ range free.” [Isaiah 32:18-20]

I do not know if this final picture from Isaiah’s vision is stated in irony because of the faltering faith of his audience or not. The people of Jerusalem wished for their lives to always be ones of peace, security and rest. But Isaiah prophesies the complete word of God, not a watered-down version to tell them pleasant things as they wished to hear. (30:10)

Yes, there would be hail that would flatten the forest and level the city. Throughout time, God would continue to discipline His people; allow the circumstances caused by wrong choices to chastise their sins. He would allow the broken world to bring disasters and diseases to draw the hearts of His children back to reliance on Him.

But during all of these distressing times, God desires to walk closely with His people and provide for their every need. All of His benefits point to the time of His Kingdom, where Messiah will reign as the perfect King. He will rule with righteousness and perfect justice. He will make deserts bloom, and all the nations kneel before Him and worship Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Lord desires that we put our faith in Him during those distressing times, because He alone can be our Help. Our strength alone will fail us. Our wealth will be spent. Our reliance on allies will prove false. The choice is clear. The pros significantly outweigh the cons. Forget Egypt or any other earthly help. Remember God’s promise to guide you. “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.’ [Isaiah 30:21]

As those who pursue the understanding of God’s Word, let us stand firmly in our worship of the Holy One of Israel. Let us not be sidetracked by our pleasures or the false directions of the world around us. When in doubt, let us weigh the pros and cons, listen to God’s Word and decide to place our trust in the Lord God Almighty as we walk into this New Year together.

Let’s pray

Please stand with me as we sing the Doxology to the Holy One