

Isaiah

Sermon 28

“Ask for God’s Direction”

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November 18, 2018

FUPC Moline, Illinois

Romans 12:1-8
Isaiah 30:1-7

Romans 12:1-8

[1] I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

[3] For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. [4] For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, [5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. [6] Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;

**[7] if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;
[8] the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who
contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one
who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (ESV)**

Isaiah 30:1-7

**[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."**

I. Introduction: Making Plans

I've noticed that for a lot of people, December is one of the most-highly scheduled months of the year. Why is that? Why do we rush around and fill our calendars with stuff to do? We all bemoan it, but then we go ahead and do it anyway. Americans are great at scheduling stuff. We like to take action, we like to stay busy, and we like to do it ourselves.

But now take an already busy schedule, and suddenly add some sort of

trauma to it. Maybe there's a work crisis, or a serious illness, or an accident, or the explosion of a relationship. In that initial sharp pain, most people respond with even more intense activity. They're trying to deal with it, they're trying to fix it, they're trying to do what needs to be done. How about you? How do you deal with a crisis? Where do you go for comfort?

God will allow such trials in your life from time to time. And when he does, he is *trying* you. He is testing your faith and your character in the midst of the adversity. For it's easy to be a Christian when all is well. It's harder when everything is on the line. How will *you* deal with adversity?

II. Historical Context

In today's Scripture passage, the prophet Isaiah is addressing the people of ancient Judah. He had been calling them to repent of their superficial worship, and to trust and obey God from the heart. But they weren't doing it. So God was allowing trials into their lives—both to get their attention, and to test them.

A. Assyrian Invasion

The primary way this was about to happen in Judah was through the coming invasion of the massive Assyrian army. They conquered the

northern kingdom of Israel, they laid waste to much of Judah, and they would besiege even the city of Jerusalem itself. In the face of this crisis, how would the people of Judah respond?

B. An Alliance with Egypt

They responded just like any other unbelieving, secular people would. They engaged in a burst of frantic activity. As the mighty Assyrians approached from the north, the leaders of Judah sent messengers to the south, to the great empire of Egypt. They sought an alliance with Egypt, and trusted in the Egyptians to save them. The problem is, they left God completely out of this equation. And that is both immoral and nonsensical—for if God really reigns over all things, then why wouldn't you appeal to him to save you? He has the power to do it. And when he sees them stubbornly refusing to ask him, he is angry, and he decrees that all their plan will end in shame and disgrace.

Now, this principle is not only true for the leaders of ancient Judah. It is true for us today as well.

III. Question: How Do You Handle Crisis in Your Life?

So let me ask you, how do you handle crisis in your own life? Do you handle it in an ungodly manner, or in a godly manner? Let's unpack each option.

A. In An Ungodly Manner?

There are numerous ways to respond to a crisis in an ungodly manner. Some common avenues include escapism; self-reliance; other people; or relying on material objects, structures, or institutions.

1. Through Escapism?

Some people deal with hard times through escapism. This is “the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy.”¹ This can be through movies, books, video games, social media, or things like that. But while entertainments can distract you temporarily, they do not remove the actual problems in your life. Godly, moral, entertainments can be a temporary respite in tough times. But entertainment is not a long-term solution to your problems. Moreover, our culture is full of ungodly, immoral entertainments. Escapism is not the solution to crisis.

2. Through Self-Reliance?

Another ungodly approach to crisis is self-reliance. Some may see it as better than escapism, because at least you are facing your problems rather than running away from them. And yes, this is a good thing. But

¹ Good Dictionary.

if you are relying only on yourself and not on God, then you are setting yourself up for failure—because no matter how strong and capable you may be, eventually God's going to throw something at you that's going to break you. Everybody hits the breaking point somewhere. Everybody needs help sometime. You either accept that and be humble, or God will one day break you down and humiliate you.

3. Through Other People?

So some people run away from their problems through escapism. But fantasy will not change reality. Others face their problems in their own strength, but everybody's strength runs out at some point. Yet others will take a further step toward wisdom, by relying on other people. But if you put your trust in other people, but are not trusting God, then the same thing that happens to *self*-reliant people will also happen to those who put their trust in others. For just as each individual is weak and sinful an subject to failure, so even *groups* of people are weak and sinful an subject to failure. Many times, in the history of warfare, a mighty army suffered a sudden defeat. In the space of an instant, the tide can turn. So if you put your trust in others, and do not trust in God, then you are exposed to disaster.

4. Through Material Things, Structures, or Institutions?

There are many other ungodly ways people sometimes try to handle

crisis in their lives. Some turn to material things—some use drugs or alcohol or food as a different form of escapism. Others trust in their money, their retirement accounts, government agencies, or different classes of professionals to bail them out. Some put their trust in an MRI, a lab test, or a course of treatment. But if you are not trusting God over and above all these things, then you are elevating objects and people into the place of honor that only God deserves. So yes, go to Iowa City; go to the Mayo Clinic—but do not trust in these places apart from God. It may be that God will heal you *through* the people and hospitals there—but if you are putting all your trust in Iowa City or the Mayo Clinic *apart* from God, then this is a ungodly idolatry.

5. All These Stubborn Sins Lead to Shame and Disgrace

Any response to crisis in your life that leaves God out is a stubborn sin that will ultimately lead to shame and disgrace. This is exactly what was going on in ancient Jerusalem. The Assyrians were invading, and the leaders of Jerusalem were dealing with the crisis in ungodly ways. They practiced escapism by contemplating the military might of Egypt. They *knew* that God existed and that they ought to worship him and seek him—Isaiah kept reminding them of it! But they would not accept Isaiah's guidance. They insisted on going their own way, and would not listen to the prophet God had ordained for their instruction. Instead of turning to God, they relied on their own plans, and they sought the help of other people by going down to Egypt and making a military alliance

with them. They left God out of this altogether. They did not inquire of God, but only sought to employ a variety of ungodly responses to the eruption of the crisis of the Assyrian invasion.

In these seven verses from Isaiah 30, God is very clear that this is a deliberate, stubborn, sinful decision to rebel against God. God is also very clear that this response will lead to shame and humiliation for them. The Egyptians would be a colossal flop. In the moment of need, the Egyptians didn't come through for Judah.

*[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."*

In verses six and seven, we read of the dangers and troubles the Judeans went through to deliver payments to the Egyptians. But it didn't do any good. When the Assyrians invaded Judah, Judah called for help, and Egypt just sat there.

B. Or in a Godly Manner?

So there are many ungodly ways to respond to crisis in your life—a few include escapism, self-reliance, or relying on other people, things, or institutions. And if your heart is far from God, then those kind of things will be your default reactions. But Isaiah 30:1-7 does not just condemn ungodly responses to crisis—it also points the way to what a *godly* response to crisis looks like. The answers are built into verses 1 and 2: a godly response to crisis is to follow *God's* plan, in alliance with the Holy Spirit, while asking the Lord for *his* direction. In sum, this means having God's overall plan for the world firmly in your mind, having an intimate personal relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, and through that connection with God, asking him fervently what *specifically* he would have you do.

1. Through God's Plan

So what is God's overall plan for the world? This is the message of the whole Bible. Our purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. He created the world good, but we fell into sin, and all creation was subjected to the curse on our account. The world is full of sin and misery now, but God will has saved his people by sending his Son Jesus Christ down from heaven, to be born of the virgin Mary. Jesus lived the perfectly righteous life we have not, and then suffered and died on the cross as our substitute. If you believe in him, then your sins are forgiven, and just as God has punished Jesus for *your* sins, so he will

reward you for *Jesus'* righteousness. Jesus' resurrection from the dead on the third day confirms all this. Jesus then ascended to heaven, and will on day return to judge the world and to make all things new. *This* is God's overall plan, and to be able to respond in a godly way to crisis, you have to be on board with this whole plan—for it is only the security we have in Jesus—that is, forgiveness and eternal life—that gives us the assurance that will carry us through even the darkest times. If you don't have faith in Jesus, then you are going to be wrecked by some sort of crisis that is coming in your life at some point.

2. In an Alliance with the Holy Spirit

If you don't have faith in Christ, then you're a sitting duck in a crisis. And if you don't have a *living* faith in Christ, you are also a sitting duck. A smoke detector is great, but if it has no batteries, then it won't do you much good. A faith commitment to Jesus at some point is great, but you need to foster that relationship and grow in him—because when crisis comes, you will end up leaning on him in new and more intense ways. Cultivate a deep relationship with God, so that you are in alliance with the Holy Spirit. Then you will be more sensitive to his leading when you most need it.

3. Asking for His Direction

And so trusting in Jesus and in alliance with the Holy Spirit, we are to

face crisis by asking God for his direction. Instead of frantically trying all our own solutions, we must come before him, and ask him for *his* will. But how do we do this?

IV. How to Ask for God's Direction

From the broader witness of the Bible, I see at least four key parts for how to ask God for his direction: these include studying God's Word, being diligent in prayer, applying his word faithfully over the whole course of your life, and consulting more experienced godly counselors who have been doing all these things longer than you have.

A. Study His Word

First, you ask God for direction by studying his Word. And if you wait until you are in crisis to pick up a Bible, then you'll be in trouble. That'd be like a surgeon cracking his textbook for the first time right before doing your surgery. Make a daily habit of being in God's word. Read the whole Bible, study it, pray over it, get help and find out what it means and how it applies to your life. Then, when you need it, the Holy Spirit will bring to mind just what you need as it applies to specific situations. So you ask God for direction *during* crisis by methodically studying God's word when you are *not* in crisis. Staying in God's word teaches you God's principles, which helps you understand God's will in your specific situation.

B. Be Diligent in Prayer

Second, ask God for direction by being diligent in prayer. Pray when things are going well. Pray when things are going badly. Seek the Lord at all times and in every situation. This will grow you in intimacy with God, and make you more sensitive to his leading. Prayer, like spending time in God's word, should be an ongoing discipline. When you spend time in God's Word, you learn his principles. When you spend time in prayer, you are asking God *directly*.

C. Apply His Word in Your Life Over Time

Third, it is important to *apply* what you learn from Bible and prayer to how you live your life over time. You don't just do this in a crisis. But when you make Bible and prayer a daily habit over years and years, and when you seek to *apply* what you learn to how you live every aspect of your life, then you will get better and better at living this all out. Then, you will be in good shape when crisis hits. The Holy Spirit will use Bible, prayer, and personal application over time to make you a more mature Christian. Hebrews 5:14: *But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* Romans 12:2 also speaks to this process of spiritual growth. It says, *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern*

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

D. Consult Godly Counselors

Finally, you can consult more experienced godly counselors in the midst of your own crisis. Because you are relying on God first, and other people who belong to him second, this represents a godly response to crisis. God ministers to us through unique spiritual gifts he gives to others, as we heard about in Romans 12. And so we rely on God directly, and also receive aid from the broader body of Christ.

In crisis, we turn to God and his people for direction and aid—and this should flow from a lifelong relationship.

V. Conclusion: Humility or Humiliation

In all these things—we must remember that no matter how wise or experienced we are, we will always need to ask God for direction.

That's why Proverbs 3:5-8 says,

*[5] Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

*[6] In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

[7] Be not wise in your own eyes;

fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

*[8] It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.*

When crisis hits, we will either be humble believers trusting in the Lord, or proud unbelievers trusting in ourselves or something else. And the Lord will lift up the humble, but pull down proud. Cultivate a humble, faithful relationship with the Lord now—or experience humiliation later. Faith in Jesus is the only way to make it through.

As I pray at every funeral, “Only you, O Lord God, are immortal, the creator and maker of all. We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, ‘You are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. For Christ is risen and all who trust in him have eternal life.

Ask Christ for direction—and where he leads, follow him.

Alleluia!

Amen.