

INTRO: One of the things we value most as Americans is our independence. We've set aside a national holiday to celebrate it. We rightly encourage financial independence in young adults. We encourage each other to be independent thinkers, not enslaved to the opinions or ideologies of our teachers. In many of these ways, independence is good. But independence can sour on us, can't it? It can turn into stubbornness if we're not careful – a refusal to seek counsel from others, a refusal to admit we're wrong, a refusal to ask for help, a reticence to trust. That's what we find this morning in Isa 30-31 in Israel's relationship with God. They think of themselves as independent of God, and that perceived independence sours into stubbornness. Israel's stubbornness reveals something about the human heart. **Our hearts are slow to trust that only God can protect us from Himself.** We see this statement worked out from both the human and divine side. In **Isa 30:1-17, our hearts are stubborn.** We are slow to trust that God's ways are better than ours; and we are slow to learn that our plans cannot protect us from God's punishments. And so we refuse to ask God's counsel, we refuse to listen to His word, and as a result we refuse to repent of both our sin and our self-reliance. In **30:18-33, God's mercy is faithful,** even in the face of all our affliction and sin and sadness; and that's what we should be trusting – the faithfulness of God's mercy to save us even in spite of ourselves, and even in spite of His own commitment to judging our sin. Yet we see in Isa **31:1-9** that **God's judgment is fearsome,** and that's why we need to be protected from it. God's judgment is so fearsome, in fact, that even the greatest militarized nations of the earth cannot defend against it.

1. OUR HEARTS ARE STUBBORN (ISA 30:1-17)

Refusal to ask (30:1-7). *“Ah, stubborn children, 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; 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!”* Stubbornness shows up in self-reliance and self-direction. Judah fears Assyria. Assyria was the military superpower to Judah's east, expanding through the Middle East with aspirations to conquer their only true rival, Egypt. Under King Ahaz, Judah had tried to get on Assyria's good side. But by now, during Hezekiah's reign, the Assyrian option had proven fruitless. Assyria had ignored Judah's pleas for mercy. They had taken Judah's tribute money and gone right ahead destroying its cities; so Judah went looking for another savior. Now, on a horizontal, common sense level, this seems sensible. If you're a small nation between two superpowers, sidle up to one or the other of them, but don't get caught in the crossfire. Yet from a vertical, spiritual perspective, the foolishness and irony is unmistakable. They choose Egypt – the very nation that had enslaved them centuries before.

Judah is trying to understand and solve its own problem, in its own way, with its own wisdom, but with no thought for how God's counsel might be different from common sense. They were too stubborn even to ask what God might think, either by prayer or by consulting His word. And this stubbornness is mixed with fear of man and the world, which is still a deadly combination for the church today. We fear that the world is about to overturn the church; but instead of consulting God's word and asking His wisdom in prayer, we assume in our stubbornness that we can trust our own common sense, which tells us to fight the world with the world. And guess where that stubbornness leads us? It leads right back to slavery in Egypt – slavery to the world's mentality, its preferences, its purposes and plans. Instead of a kingdom of priests, mediating God's holiness and love, we become a kingdom of pawns, a church controlled by worldly interests. In **vv.3-5** God will not let us get away with this kind of stubborn reasoning. He will take the object of our security, and turn it to our shame. Look there in v.3 and notice the repetition of “shame, humiliation,” and again in v.5 “shame, shame, disgrace.” Our stubbornness is rooted in our pride. We refuse to ask God's counsel in His word and prayer, and so God confounds our plans, breaks our pride, and make us ashamed of the plans we've made in our stubbornness.

Refusal to listen (30:8-14). The stubbornness of v.1 shows up here not just as self-determination, but as refusal to listen to God's word. In v.9 they are *“unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord; 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, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”* That is ever the temptation for the church – let's not hear any more about God's burning holiness and its

implications for us. Preach nice. Quit telling us that we need to repent. Quit telling us that God is not pleased with our hypocrisy. Tell us we're OK. The prophet Amos dealt with this stubborn demand for soft preaching in **Amos 2:12** *"You commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy.'" Micaiah dealt with it in **1 Kings 22:13** "Behold, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably."* Micah dealt with it in **Mic 2:6** *"Do not preach' – thus they preach – 'one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us'"* (cf. 2:11). Jeremiah dealt with it when everyone wanted to believe that the exile would only last two more years like the false prophet Hananiah had said in **Jer 28**, which Jeremiah rightly called *"rebellion against the Lord."* Rebellion against the Lord was painting too rosy a picture for God's people. Ezekiel dealt with it in **Ezek 13:10-11** *"Precisely because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace, and because when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash, say to these who smear it with whitewash that it shall fall!"* The falling wall is the same metaphor Isaiah uses in **Isa 30:13** *"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; 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 heart, or to dip up water out of the cistern."* That's how thoroughly God will deal with his people, and their sins, and their stubborn demand for easy-listening sermons. This wall imagery makes sense in light of the security issue. Because you've trusted in the wrong thing, the thing you are trusting will be like a breach in the wall, and your means of protection will fail you.

Paul had to warn Timothy of the same stubborn demand for soft preaching in **2Tim 4:3-4** *The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."* And still today, congregations say to their preachers, *"speak to us smooth things...let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel."* Whole ministry philosophies are inadvertently built on that sentence. The most offensive thing Isaiah preached about, even among God's own people, was the holiness of God. Isaiah's congregation wanted the Bible to be about them, not about the Holy One of Israel; the same is often true in the church still today. And the job of the faithful preacher to keep preaching the Holy One of Israel, and the repentance and faith that He requires, which we see in vv.15-17.

Refusal to repent (read 30:15-17). *"Returning and rest"* are repentance and faith. Returning includes repenting from self-reliance and my own wisdom. It's turning from reliance on self and on the world, to reliance on God's power and wisdom. *"In quietness and trust shall be your strength."* This was Isaiah's message. Israel was sinning and offending God's holiness. Isaiah was warning them of that. Yet he was also saying that the way to be saved is not to trust your own common sense; don't go to Egypt. Trust in God's word, God's power, God's wisdom. The way to be saved was to listen to God's warnings, believe His promises, and obey His commands. *"But you were unwilling,"* Isaiah says, and he reminds them that instead of trusting in God to deliver them from Assyria, they trusted in military alliances and horses, which is exactly what God's Law forbid in **Dt. 17:16**. *"Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again.'" in Isa 30:16, the punishment will fit the crime. You said you'd flee on horses, so you'll get your way – you will flee. You said you 'd ride on swift horses, so those chasing you will be swift. And the ultimate indignity comes v.17, which is exactly what God promised would happen if Israel disobeyed His law. Instead of one Israelite soldier putting a thousand foreign soldiers to flight, as was promised for obedience in Lev 26:8, it will be reversed. One foreign soldier will make a thousand Israelites run, until Israel is left as exposed as a flag on a hill – target practice.*

Yet Isaiah has already said that Assyria is an axe in God's hand. Assyria is not some rogue nation that has escaped God's sovereignty. Assyria is God's whip, disciplining Judah for her idolatry and infidelity to God. So Judah is running from one country that God is using as an axe, right into the arms of another country that God had already defeated centuries ago. God had already broken Egypt's back once, and that was without the

Assyrian army. Egypt can't do anything to protect Israel from God. **Only God can protect Israel from God.** Judah tried to solve her problem before she even understood it. The problem was not Assyria. The problem was that God had raised Assyria up against Judah because of Judah's sinfulness. Judah's sin was the problem. Solve that, and you solve Assyria; but Egypt can't help you solve the sin problem. In fact, if God is the one raising up Assyria, then Egypt can't even help you solve the Assyrian problem. That's why he says back in v.5 and again in v.6 that Egypt is "*a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit.*" It's why he says in v.7 "*Egypt's help is worthless and empty.*" Israel was too stubborn to ask God's counsel, too stubborn to listen to God's word, and so they assumed the problem was on the outside. But the problem was on the inside. Judah was the problem. The solution to the problem was to repent of their sin. But they were too stubborn for that. Friend, surely you can see the relevance of all this. If you're a non-Christian listening to this sermon, we want you to know that the threats and fears that you face now are not your ultimate problem. Your ultimate problem is that there is a sovereign and holy God behind every one of the fears in your life, warning you that your sin is an offense to his holiness, and that if you're not careful, He will break out against you. You cannot keep running from Him. You cannot hide from him or protect yourself from the burning nature of his holiness. Only God can protect you from His holiness breaking out against you and your sin. And God has made Himself approachable for us by sending His Son Jesus to take on our human flesh and weakness, to live a sinless life, to die the death we deserved for our sins, to rise from the dead, and to invite us to turn from our self-reliance and to rely on Him instead to be reconciled to God.

Christian, there's a stubborn heart in you too. You still have to fight against your natural inclination to ignore God's counsel by make decisions and plans without reference to Him. And maybe that big problem you're facing now isn't on the outside. Maybe the problem isn't someone else. Maybe it's your own sin. Is your heart willing to listen to that, even to consider it? Maybe there's a corner of your heart that's getting tired of hearing about God's holiness and your sin. Oh friend, it's God's kindness that keeps warning you of those things. "*In returning and rest you'll be saved.*" Turn from that sin, Christian, and rest in Jesus' righteousness.

2. GOD'S MERCY IS FAITHFUL (ISA 30:18-33)

In the face of affliction (30:18-22). Verse 18 begins with "*therefore,*" which connects it back to Israel's faithless stubbornness in vv.1-17; but it's what comes after the "therefore" that's surprising. We'd expect all that sinful stubbornness to be met with judgment. But God meets it with mercy instead. "*Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you.*" That's the interpretation of God's present judgment. God is waiting to be gracious. And all who wait for Him to bless, will themselves be blessed. It's as if he's saying, "The Lord would be gracious to you now if you'd just repent; but you're being stubborn, so the Lord waits to pour out his mercy." Israel's sin has not made God abandon his purpose of being merciful to Israel. God's mercy will be faithful even in spite of Israel's faithlessness. In v.19, God will answer Israel in her sadness - as soon as he hears her cry out to Him, He will answer, even though her sadness is her own fault. In v.20, God will be gracious and reveal Himself, even though He has been hiding and giving Israel feeding Israel on affliction and suffering because of her own sin. In v.21, God's mercy will give Israel the direction they failed to seek at the beginning of the chapter. And in v.22, God's mercy will even go so far as to give Israel a change of heart in order to defile and forsake their idols. God's mercy is faithful, even in the face of our sadness, even when that sadness is caused by our own sin and its consequence. Oh Christian, isn't that good to know? Don't you need to hear that? God's mercy will be faithful to us even when we're sad because of our own sin and its effects. Even when our sadness is our own fault, God's mercy will not fail. And look at all that God's mercy will be faithful to do in vv.22-33.

Faithful to bear fruit (30:22-25). In vv.22-25, God will let His people enjoy supernatural fruitfulness. The bread and water of blessing contrast with "*the bread of adversity and the water of affliction*" from v.20. God can and does replace the bread of affliction with the bread of satisfaction. The idea is that God's judgment or discipline of Israel won't last forever. He will restore what He's taken away, and it appears that he will do this both physically, in the new creation, and spiritually, under the new covenant even now. This is really earthy language, with livestock and oxen and donkeys even eating some of the fruit of the harvest. The likelihood is

that the first application to make is that this is part of what it will be like in the new creation after God judges all sin and recreates the earth. Harvests will be really good, animals will be treated and fed really well, and in v.25 irrigation will never be a problem, because there will be streams of water almost everywhere you look. And this will happen “in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.” That’s really ominous language, but the meaning goes back to Isa 2, where everything lofty, all the pride of man, would be laid low. That’s the final Day of the Lord. So once that happens, creation will be set free to produce this amazing fruitfulness that even our best scientists have never been able to produce. Judgment comes first, but then God’s mercy will be faithful to give our resurrected bodies all we could ever hope to enjoy.

Yet this fruitfulness is also spiritual. It’s a kind of fruitfulness that produces things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. The same kind of imagery is used in 32:14-15, “For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted. . .until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high (Pentecost, Acts 2), and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.” That’s talking about the effects of the Spirit being poured out on God’s people in Acts 2. It’s agricultural imagery applied to spiritual transformation and bearing the fruit of godliness. The same thing is going on here. Yes, God will renew the earth itself to produce abundantly for His people by His mercy in the new creation. AND, even before that happens, God will, by that same mercy, pour out His Spirit on His people to bear the good fruit of obedience that Israel failed to bear. But God’s mercy will be faithful to do even more. It will heal us in v.26.

Faithful to heal (30:26; cf. Hos 6:1). “*Moreover, 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.*” The cosmic imagery probably shouldn’t be taken too literally, otherwise, we’d be baking like potatoes under a seven-fold sun the new creation, which isn’t much of a blessing. The idea is probably more like the one we find in **Isa 60:19-20** “*Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever....*” This, in turn, sounds like **Rev 21:23** “*And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb...and there will be no night there.* Or again in **Rev 22:5** *And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light....*” Darkness, both moral and physical, will give way to never-ending light, both moral and physical. And even now, now that Jesus has been raised from the dead, when God gives people new hearts, the NT explains it in terms of being transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light (Col 1). We go from being blind to the things of God, to seeing them more clearly than ever. It’s like stepping into the warmth of the sun on a cold afternoon. It’s rejuvenating.

This light is associated with healing in v.26, like the sun of righteousness with healing in its wings in **Mal 3:2**. God will heal all the wounds that his own discipline has inflicted. It’s a lot like what Hosea said in **Hos 6:1** “*Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.*” It’s the tender ministry of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in Ezek 34:16 where He binds up the injured and strengthens the weak. It’s the ministry of God as father in Heb 12, disciplining us for our good. God’s judgment isn’t the end of the story for God’s people. God wants an obedient relationship with His children; so when we disobey, he disciplines; but he doesn’t discipline in order to sever the relationship. He disciplines to help us learn to obey, so that we can be restored to obedient relationship (Heb 12). God gives us His tenderness after He has given us His toughness. And He even promises that tenderness as we endure the toughness, as a motivation to persevere under his discipline.

Faithful to protect (30:27-33). God’s mercy is also faithful to protect. In vv.27-33 the Lord’s anger is directed at Israel’s enemies, especially Assyria. Even though they’ve forsaken God, and trusted in Egypt more than in Him, the Lord will still come to their aid. In v.30, fire, storm, and hail are all images that describe God appearing to man, like He did at Mt Sinai in Ex 19 when there was thunder, lightning, and fire (hail, Ex 9:17;

Josh 10:11). Isaiah says in v.31 that the Assyrians *will be terror stricken*, not at the sight of Egypt, but “*at the voice of the Lord, when he strikes with His rod.*” Israel will be saved, but not by Egypt. They will be saved from Assyria by the very God that they are now forsaking and ignoring. And isn’t that the epitome of salvation by grace alone? God is saving the very people who least deserve it.

One of the things we learn about God here is that He is a warrior. He fights. The God of the Bible is not some weak-sauce, impish pushover. He’s not beholden to anyone or scared of anyone. He’s never ambushed, and he can’t be outgunned. He is a warrior-king (Ex 15:3; Ps 24:8), and to the surprise of our modern sensitivities, every stroke of His rod on the Assyrian army will be to the rhythm of the victory song that God’s people will be singing. You don’t trifle with this God. He is to be dreaded by His enemies, and He is to be celebrated by His people, because God fights for His people, He fights for the cause of justice, and He wins.... Now again, that might offend our modern sensitivities when we’re talking about God; but every time you cheer for the hero of an action movie as he’s putting the villain in his place, you innately agree that it is right to fight the enemies of justice. What the Bible clarifies is that God is the God who makes justice what it is, and He is the ultimate warrior who enforces justice and takes righteous vengeance on His enemies and the enemies of those who trust in Him. That’s an important part of what makes Him God.

But v.33 ratchets it up a notch. It adds that God is the one who has created and prepared hell, God sustains hell, He is sovereign over all that happens in Hell, and he even prepares it with the wicked in mind. That is what God’s enemies and critics don’t realize. We’ll see in Isa 36 that Assyria assumed Israel’s God was no more powerful than any other idol. But what Assyria, and every other enemy of God, fails to consider is that the God of the Bible has been preparing Hell from long, long ago. The outcome of God’s fight with Assyria was never in question. God is not only ready for the battle – he is ready for the burial. “*A burning place has long been prepared,*” and it is prepared personally by God, with his enemies in mind. “*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.*” This is not a picture of spiritual dualism, God in heaven, Satan in hell, fighting it out, with the outcome still in question. No. Hell belongs to God; and the fuel for Hell’s fire does not come from Satan’s sinfulness. It comes from God’s holiness breaking out against all that is sinful. It is God’s own holy breath that kindles the fire of Hell. And yet even hell is an expression of God’s mercy for His people, so that they can leave vengeance with the Lord and know that He will execute it to perfection on their behalf.

3. GOD’S JUDGMENT IS FEARSOME (ISA 31:1-9)

It will be irresistible (read 31:1-4). It’s fearsome first of all in the sense that it is irresistible. In vv.1-3, horses and horsemen won’t be able to fight against it. Or, in modern day language, F-18’s, stealth bombers, M-1 tanks, satellites, drones, and infantry won’t even be able to mount a significant resistance. If Isaiah lived today, he might say something like this. “Are you out of your mind?! Don’t you have any idea what you’re up against? Military power and strategy can’t do you any good against God!” Horses were symbols of national military strength, and chariots were the prime example of advanced military technology in the ANE. If a nation had lots of chariots, lots of horses, and lots of capable men to drive and ride them, then that nation would be thought of as both powerful and secure. There is the great issue – **security**; security from evil people and forces, and security from God’s judgment. Horses and chariots represent worldly strength in numbers and technology – they “*trust in chariots because they are many, and horsemen because they are very strong.*” These are contrasted in v.1 with looking to God. They trust in chariots and horsemen, “*but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord.*” It’s worldly pragmatism and self-reliance, versus reliance on God.

Christian, where is your security, both for yourself and for the church? Is your personal security in a job or a bank account? Maybe it’s in some friendship or network of connections. But this is mainly a corporate issue for the church. Churches can trust in all kinds of things for their security and prosperity. We can trust in numbers, we can trust in a savings account, we can trust in an advertising campaign. None of those things are necessarily wrong in themselves, but trusting in them for our security is wrong. God had been warning Israel against

trusting in horses as early as Dt 17, where God prohibited the king from multiplying horses. The wisdom literature repeatedly warns God's people against putting their trust in military strength and technology. **Ps 20:7** *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright.*” **Ps 33:17** *The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue.*” **Ps 147:10** *“His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.”*

The issue is what we trust in to make us secure. Israel sought security from man. Look there in v.3, *“The Egyptians are man and not God.”* In other words, man is not reliable like God is. Man is not all-knowing, or all-powerful, or all sufficient, like God is. So you can't trust in man for security, especially when you're up against God's judgment. In fact, Jeremiah says in **Jer 17:5** *“cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.”* That's exactly what **pragmatism** does. Isaiah is pressing home the point of **Prov 21:30-31** *No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord*” (cf. Hos 14:3).

The Lord's judgment will be irresistible. In v.2, *“he does not call back his words,”* he doesn't change his mind or get cold feet; He is totally resolved to judge all evil. And in v.3. *“... When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together.”* Israel is seeking help from Egypt, yet Egypt is just as helpless against God's judgment as Israel is. The reason is that *“their horses are flesh, and not spirit.”* The breath and word of God are more powerful than the arm of militarized man. You can't kill God with a gun, or with anything else devised by man. God is almighty and immortal. He is not afraid of man. He cannot be threatened by man. That's the point of v.4. When God comes to judge the world, He will be like an undaunted Lion growling over his prey. He's not going to be scared off by the yelling of some shepherds. There is only one Shepherd that can protect you from God's judgment – the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who lays down His life for the sheep, steps in, and takes God's judgment, which was directed at us, for our sin, so that we might live.... In 31:5-7 God's judgment will be discriminating.

It will be discriminating (31:5-7). God's judgment is not random. It's intelligent, personal, and directed, which makes it all the more fearsome. His strength is wed to discretion. God is a warrior, but He is not a brute. He is all-wise, all-seeing, all knowing. He will not let the guilty escape, nor will he let the repentant perish. Even in the midst of his judgment, God will provide the protection that Israel sought from Egypt back in 30:2-3. God will protect Jerusalem from Assyria like a bird hovering over her nest (cf. Dt 32:11). But that protection hinges on repentance and faith in v.6. *“Turn to him from whom people have deeply revolted....”* God's protection is not for those who still defend their right to rebel against God. His protection is for those who give up defending themselves and their sin, and turn to God for mercy and help and protection from his judgment. Repentance is required. Turn to Him. Take His side against your sin. Trust His wisdom against the pragmatism of the world.

It will be supernatural (31:8-9). The final reason God's judgment will be fearsome is that it will be supernatural. In vv.8-9 we learn that there is a sword that is *“not of man.”* That sword is exactly what secular humanism and godless science and even eastern mysticism all want to exclude from reality. What offends modern man most is the idea that there might be a supernatural sword hovering over him. That is what modern man is running away from so hard. The popular wisdom today is that there is no judge who transcends this world, who stands over it to rule and punish and reward. If there is a god, he is either not transcendent, or he is not a judge. But what modern man cannot allow is the combination of a God who is both transcendent and a judge. Man will allow God to be immanent and act as judge for the few who believe in him. Or he can be transcendent but not be a judge, just a cosmic psychologist who helps us with our self-esteem. But once we admit a transcendent judge, a judge over all men without exception, then we have to admit that man is not the captain of his own ship. Man is secondary, derivative, subordinate, and accountable – to God. And that means that the only protection from God, is to be hidden in God. **Only God can protect us from Himself.** Who's protecting you?