

## *Tell Me Lies, Tell Me Sweet Little Lies*

Isaiah 30:8-17

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Derek Pulliam

[P.D. MAYFIELD]: Thank you. I would like to introduce our guest preacher this morning. Derek is a teaching elder at Believer's Chapel in Baltimore, Maryland, where he serves by sharing the preaching and teaching duties with elder Novell DeLoatch. He and his wife, U'Vonda, have three children: two daughters by the name of Sky and Ryan, and a son, Derek Jr. He goes by DJ. Derek works full-time as a business analyst for the Social Security Administration. So grab him after the service and ask some questions, maybe. You might have better headway with him. But thank you for coming and preaching God's Word with us this morning. And Derek, please come.

[DEREK PULLIAM]: Good morning. You know, when folks ask you to write a bio, it's really difficult to figure out what you want to put down on paper. Because I even read a few sample bios, and all of them came off so prideful. I wanted to slide in things that were fun, you know? But you guys don't know me well enough for me to be that fun. But since I'm up here now, I mean, things like avid aficionado of comic books, lover of sci-fi, things like that. And in the spirit of sci-fi, you probably look up here and wonder, "What is happening at CPC?" Let's be honest. You start having conversations about shifting from the OPC to the PCA. And then you have a conference about "Christ and Culture in the African Context." And then you come up and you see me. What's going on?

And just to be completely honest, when I found out that "Christ and Culture in the African Context" was taking place on the 18<sup>th</sup>, I said, "I have to preach on the 19<sup>th</sup>." At this time, I invite you to open your Bibles to Isaiah 30. The focus of our meditation, our attention, will be verses 8 through 17 of Isaiah 30. And it reads:

And now, go, write it before them on a tablet  
and inscribe it in a book,  
that it may be for the time to come  
as a witness forever.  
For they are a rebellious people,  
lying children,  
children 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."  
Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,  
"Because you despise this word  
and trust in oppression and perverseness  
and rely on them,  
therefore 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 hearth,  
or to dip up water out of the cistern.”

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel,  
“In returning and rest you shall be saved;  
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”

But you were unwilling, and you said,  
“No! We will flee upon horses”;  
therefore you shall flee away;  
and, “We will ride upon swift steeds”;  
therefore your pursuers shall be swift.  
A thousand shall flee at the threat of one;  
at the threat of five you shall flee,  
till you are left  
like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain,  
like a signal on a hill. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Shall we go before the Lord in prayer?

Heavenly Father, as we sang earlier, we need Thee. O, we need Thee. Lord, we need you in this moment, because we are so excited and yearning to hear from you, Lord God. We want to come before your Word and be able to see and hear in the Word, “Behold our God.” Father, I ask in this moment that I might decrease so that your Son might increase. Be exalted in the preaching, be exalted in the hearing, be exalted in the applying. This asked in Jesus’ name. Amen.

As you can see in your bulletins, this message is a message that I’ve entitled “Tell Me Lies, Tell Me Sweet Little Lies.” And in your mind you can hear the tune, almost. The title of the sermon comes from a song written by some cultural anthropologists, artists, if you will, named Fleetwood Mac. And as these songwriters were penning this song, they were framing this song around the idea of unrequited love. From the standpoint of one partner in the relationship, the relationship was over. It was done with. But for the other partner, it was not so. It was not so, even to the point that that partner was willing to live with nothingness and elusion—a lie. Tell me lies. Tell me sweet little lies. Tell me lies.

But not only do we find this sort of thinking or reasoning in this song, but we also find it in a song written in the 1920s. A song that was written in the 1920s and made popular in the 1960s by Elvis Presley. Oh my goodness, bizarre world—we’ve got this dude up here quoting Fleetwood Mac and Elvis Presley. It’s the song “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” And as Elvis sang this song, he had in mind his wife who was leaving him. And he said in the song—or, he sings in the song, “Honey, you lied when you said you loved me / And I had no cause to doubt you / But I’d rather go on hearing your lies / Than go on living without you.”

The song romanticizes the lie. You know, when you hear that, you say, “Man, that sounds absolutely stupid. I don’t want to live with a lie.” And then putting on your Biblical hat, you would say something along the lines of, “Well, the Bible says the truth shall set you free.” Yeah, that wants to be my answer. I want that to be my response. But at the same time as you hear the song, it sort of resonates with your heart. It resonated, in fact, with the hearts of those in Judah in the same way it resonates with our heart: the desire to hear a comforting lie over the unpleasant truth. You know, we look at the people of Judah as they’re depicted in the Book of Isaiah, and they were a people that were vacillating as it related to their faithfulness or their faith in God.

At the time of this writing, the king was King Hezekiah. And if we look over at 2 Kings 18, we see that King Hezekiah was a good king. But nonetheless, we see his kingdom as a kingdom of compromise at

this point. Because in his kingdom, his leaders, even some of the religious leaders—and yes, indeed, the political leaders; we see that in chapter 28 and 29 of Isaiah—they were moving away from the truth of God and trusting in God, and moving toward the comforting lie of trusting in Egypt. They were taking up that sort of mindset that many believers take up today. When they hear about this faith, faith in the One we cannot see, they think, “Well, I’ve got to practically live in this world, so there are some practical,” dare I say, “atheistic thoughts that I need to take up.” That in the moment when it calls for trusting God, my pain tells me that it’s a silly thing to do that. I’d rather trust a comforting lie. Tell me lies. Tell me sweet little lies. Tell me lies.

So we look down at verses 8 through 11. We see the rejection of the truth there. The rejection of the truth in favor of a smooth word. And if we were to go a little bit more into our recap, we would see that this compromise, this not trusting God, had begun to seep into the fabric of Israel—or the southern kingdom of Judah, better stated. For earlier in Isaiah—Isaiah chapters 7 and 8—we see Isaiah appealing to Hezekiah’s father, King Ahaz. He’s appealing to him to trust the Lord in the midst of their difficulty. The kingdom was about to be sieged by the northern kingdom of Israel. It was about to be sieged by Syria.

And King Ahaz was taking up the decision of trusting in Assyria as their protector. Isaiah is coming to Ahaz, and he’s telling him, “The Lord is directing you to trust Him. To ask of Him a sign.” And King Ahaz gives an answer that would sort of resonate with us. Because Ahaz says something along the lines of, “I will not tempt God, to require a sign of him.” And we say, man, Ahaz the wicked king is sounding a little spiritual there. But no, he had already made up his mind not to trust God. It’s the same way that we trick ourselves. We use Christianese or spiritual jargon to baptize our sin or our compromise. And that’s what Ahaz was doing.

Fast-forward years later. We see the effect of Ahaz’s regime was still reverberating in the regime of King Hezekiah. And to a context like this, we see the Lord God speaking to his prophet Isaiah. And he’s telling them to get among the people and “present my Word.” And he frames it in the following way: “And now, go, write it before them on a tablet.” That is a placard. Write it among them. A billboard. It’s a public record. And if you’re a careful student of your Bible, immediately as you look down and you see, “Go see, go write it,” you’re wondering, well, what’s the *it*? And a number of commentators land on that same question.

Well, what is the *it*? Some of them look back and they say well, the *it* refers to the tail end, that last phrase that we find in verse 7 where it says, “Rahab, who sits still.” Rahab the do-nothing. Rahab was another name or colorful illustrative name of speaking of Egypt. You’re trusting in Egypt, and Egypt is the do-nothing. Rahab is also sort of a cultural description of a great cosmic sea beast or serpent. And when you look at that and you compare chapter 27 verse 1, and you see him speaking of the Leviathan. And then you see him speaking Rahab, that same sort of serpent-like beast, you can’t help but think about the ancient serpent, the adversary of our souls, and how the writer is equating trust in the help of Egypt as almost a demonic thing of trusting in Satan. And so the billboard was to remind them that not only can the world not help you, but in trusting in the world, you are by extension trusting on the god of this world, Satan. And so that billboard stands before them as a public record.

But then he continues on. Because he says, “Inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come.” So this word that he’s presenting to this sinful context is not just a word to be written for a public record for that moment. But the prophet was understanding that the word that he was presenting was not a trending word, but it was a perpetual word—one that would be in public as well as in private. And the Lord says, “I am having you do this, because these people are a rebellious people.” The word there that describes them as being rebellious is a word that we see over and over again throughout the Book of Deuteronomy. It’s almost used as a technical term to refer to the children of Israel as covenant-breakers. He’s pointing to them as covenant-breakers.

And then he calls them lying children. And we think from that—that's not the best rendering there—as he calls them lying children, your first thought is to say they weren't truthful. But a more literal rendering is to say that they were false sons. What was expected of them was not fleshed out in their lives. They were a sham. They were phonies. They were fakes. Reading that, I think about times where we are living out our Christian walk before the watching world, only to hear things like, as soon as you trip up, "I thought you were a Christian." And in that moment you feel like a sham, a phony, and a fake—someone in line with Judah here. These sham people, these false children, who were unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord. It's not—as it says, they were unwilling to hear the instruction of the Lord—it's not to say that they weren't interested in worship.

As we go throughout Isaiah, we see that they were still faithfully attending worship. They were still offering up their sacrifices. So they go to these seers, these prophets. And intentionally, he's calling them seers or beholders or this word "prophet" here is not to speak of how they are to transmit what they're receiving. But it's speaking more so to the reception of revelation. He's saying to the prophets, "Do not receive the revelation from the Lord. Do not get your talking points from God himself." They're saying it's that, "Look, we don't want you to listen to God or tell us any of the right things, anything that's going to impact the way that we live out our lives. Continue to preach. But preach to us instead smooth things. Give us a little bit of flattery." When Martin Luther looked at this text, he said, "Look, they're referring to soft preaching. Give us soft preaching. That's what we want." Tell us lies. Tell us sweet little lies.

As you come down to verse 11, it says, "Leave the way, turn aside from the path." There are actually two ways that you can understand this. One of the ways to understand this is to see the prophets as those that were ruining the fun of these individuals. So as it says "leave the way, turn aside from the path," it could be saying, "You are blocking our way to happiness. Get out of the way." Another way to understand this is for them to be saying—and I lean more toward this—is for them to actually be telling the prophets, "You, as you are on the path of God, proclaiming his Word—we're encouraging you to get off that path. We're calling you to a spirit of compromise." Why? "Because we don't want to hear anything else about the Holy One of Israel." Tell us lies. Tell us sweet little lies. Tell us lies.

As they're saying, "We don't want to hear anything about the Holy One of Israel," as they are saying this to them, what the prophet is not doing—he's not giving us a literal quote that's coming from their lips. He's doing something similar to what he did earlier in chapter 28 verse 15. Chapter 28 verse 15 of Isaiah, they start to talk about the plans that they have. And Isaiah was giving them a true sense of this plan that wasn't going to deliver them. So as they're describing their plan, he gives them the unvarnished reality of their plan and says, "Look, you have set up a covenant with the grave. Your plan is going to lead you to death." And in like manner, he's giving us the heart of how these people feel concerning the will, the way of the Holy One of Israel. And they're saying—or rather, they're living out the fact that they don't want to hear from him. As Isaiah speaks of the Holy One of Israel, he speaks to us of one who Rudolf Otto referred to as the *Mysterium Tremendum*. To quote Rudolf Otto, he says that: "The holiness of God evokes a reaction of silence and provokes terror, because it presents itself as an overwhelming power." Indeed, we don't want to hear from this one.

And even as they're saying that they don't want to hear from the Holy One of Israel, there's a bit of irony in the passage. Because when we look at verse 12, what do we see? "Therefore." Says who? "The Holy One of Israel." The one who you reject is speaking to you now. And as he speaks, he gives them the grounds of the judgment to come, showing them the repercussions or the consequences of their perverse path. "Because you despise this word and trust in oppression and perverseness and rely on them." And you read that and you say, well, what do you mean when it says that they're trusting in oppression and perverseness? Well, there's a couple of ways to understand that as well.

In their culture, they had it stacked against those who are a part of the subculture of the southern kingdom of Judah, those who were the indigent, those who were the impoverished. The Book of Amos speaks volumes about this—how they would take advantage of them in court, and even take the very dust

of their head so as to oppress them. One commentator says that, “As we see them trusting in oppression, that is to say that they are using these ill-gotten gains that they had gotten from the poor as a way to stack up their treasures,” that we see in verse 6 of this same chapter. The treasures that they heaped upon the backs of their animals, to carry on down to Egypt. There’s another way of seeing this. In fact, the word’s Biblical commentary takes the two words “oppression” and “perverseness,” puts them together, and says, “Because you have trusted in a perverse tyrant.” That is pointing to Egypt. “Because you have trusted in Egypt and relied on them, this iniquity shall be to you.”

I have no support from any other commentator, so take this for what it’s worth. When I see this, this oppression and perverseness, from a lyrical, poetry, parallel standpoint, it fits really nicely with what we find in the verses that precede it. They were oppressing those who were the mouthpieces of God. They were looking to suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness. And they were averting them from the path. I need to wait ‘til some commentators start writing on that to get a little more support. But we see that measure of parallelism there. The Lord had sent his Word for the purpose of redeeming them. He had sent his Word for the purpose of keeping them in the confines of his love, so that they could live out their walk of holy existence before God and be under his smile. He had sent his Word so that they would be protected and preserved. But they had minimized his Word.

This is the picture of the closed Bible. This is the picture of the neglected sermon. This is the picture of the one who sees P.D.’s call on the caller ID and says, “Nah, I’m not answering that.” Told you, preach us smooth things, didn’t I? It’s the neglecting to hear from God. And all of a sudden, there’s this small, imperceptible breach. You were expecting that these high-sounding, fine-sounding arguments would be a wall for you. These philosophies that were God-ish, that were Biblical-esque, sort of, but still denied the power of who God was. You saw that as a wall of protection. But all the while, you didn’t realize that there was a breach in that high wall. That breach that was beginning to bulge. I think it’s Ephesians 4:26-27 that speaks about not allowing Satan to have a foothold.

And this kind of communicates that. This sin, this iniquity that leads into this small, imperceptible breach that bulges out, that leads to a collapse, is what it looks like in our walks of sanctification. That little bit of compromise. That little bit of saying, “Well, you know, they got a point—the LGBTQMOUSE and all the other alphabets. Black lives matter? Okay, well, on the face of it, looks like they’ve got a point, and I can support that.” Obama? Trump? Whoever you want to put your banner above you as you begin to make politics or social-trending arguments your hope and your stay. Right there is where your breach forms. Right there is your point of collapse. At the point where you start to deviate from the Word of God being the unique thing that’s able to bind your conscience above all else. That’s where the breach forms.

And then you look at the Scripture and you say, “Okay, they’ve got a little breach in the wall, but there’s still a wall there.” But it doesn’t take us long to see that the wall collapses. And then we see that there’s a complete uselessness with them. They’re like a pot that you can’t scoop up fire, you can’t scoop up water. They’re absolutely good for nothing. And that’s the repercussions for us. Saints, when you used to sort of like flowing in ministry and helping folks, and all of a sudden you find yourself feeling completely useless. Or beyond feeling completely useless. The fleshing out of what you are attempting to do for the kingdom ends up being absolutely useless, because of the breach.

But God doesn’t leave us there. For as we look down at verse 15 through 17, we see us moving from repercussions to redemption. “For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, ‘In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.’” P.D., how am I looking on time? I’ve lost track. I’m good? Okay. All right. Just start making faces at me and pointing if I go too long. I’m bringing it to a close. As we come down to the last few verses of our focus today, these verses bring to mind a very—one of my very favorite phrases from Habakkuk. A phrase that’s found in Habakkuk 3 as it says, “In wrath, remember mercy.”

Habakkuk's crying out, and he had this small-god theology at the very beginning of Habakkuk. In chapter 1, he's all yelling and shaking his fist at God, because God wasn't at work in the way that he wanted to see God working. And so as God starts to unfold or explain his plan, he wants God to pump the brakes a little bit. It brings him to a place of utter and complete humiliation. And that humiliation leads to worship. And that worship leads to further brokenness, because he sees this big God. He sees this big God who would deal with sins among his people as well as sins in the warring nations surrounding his people. And so Habakkuk, in a state of utter and complete helplessness, says, "In the midst of wrath, because I know the chastening is coming, remember mercy." And God does that in this passage.

We see the Holy One of Israel. And it's very likely repeated over and over again, because I could imagine Isaiah not being able to get away from that label, the Holy One of Israel. Thirty-two times that label is used in the Old Testament. How many times is it used in Isaiah? Twenty-six. Isaiah couldn't get past the Holy One of Israel. Imagine if your call to the ministry looked like Isaiah 6. Where you're standing before the throne room of God, where there are holy beings confirmed in holiness, without spot or wrinkle. And even they just can't get themselves together before the Holy Other, the *Mysterium Tremendum*. As they cry "holy, holy, holy," they are covering themselves. I used to think that they were covering themselves because they didn't want to glory in the presence of God. But I think it's more logical to say that they were covering themselves because of the fear that they had as it relates to the Holy One of Israel.

And so as Isaiah is repeatedly speaking of the Holy One of Israel and trembling before his presence, we come down to this solemn warning and this word of redemption. And he's telling his people, "In returning and rest is your salvation." The word there, returning, is sort of a picturesque word of speaking of repentance. Returning and rest—two sides of the same coin, like repentance and faith. He's calling them away from the path that they're on. He says, "Look, in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." It's the same sort of language that he used when he was dealing with Ahaz in chapter 8. It's the same sort of language that Moses uses when he says, "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." It's a call to a sense of inactivity. Stop your own pragmatic, practical ways of trying to save yourself. Stop looking to this world and its many devices as your hope and stay. And then you look at this and you say, "Well, as I look and I see this iniquity that is set upon the people of Judah, I am more akin to see myself vacillating like them. I see myself struggling to be right before the Lord."

And when we hear things like returning and rest, we think that there's some sort of spiritual leap that we're supposed to do. And we just can't muster up that leap. But in reality, we don't see a call to leap. That's sort of like a recapitulation or a walking in the footsteps that went before him. We see Christ coming in the volume of the book that was written of him. In the place of those who were seen as rebellious people, we see Christ as the one who says, "My meat and my drink is to do your will, O God." In place of the false children, the false sons, we see the true Son, whom the Father says that he is well pleased with. Christ comes and lives out all the requirements that we could not fulfill.

And so as the Lord looks down and he sees us believing ones, he sees sort of hot-mapped over us the righteousness of Christ. An alien righteousness. And so I can move in that spirit of inactivity of sorts. I can confidently say that I am saved by works—it's just not my works. It's the works of another. I can rest in him and trust in him and find my strength in him. And we want the sermon to end at verse 15 and say, "Hallelujah, praise the Lord," close the Bible, benediction time. But then we come down to the tail end of verse 15, and it says, "But you were unwilling." It's like watching a movie, and you know the killer's on the other side of the door. And you're watching them go to the door, and you're saying, "Don't go through that door. Aw, they went through the door." Or you're watching them run—and there's always that one young lady, she falls. And you're thinking, "Leave her! You can date again! Leave her!"

You come down to verse 15, and you consider the beauty of what you saw there. And you come down to the tail end of it, and it says, "But you were unwilling." In response to the free offer of salvation, they say, "No, we'll flee upon horses. We'll trust in our own ingenuity to get us over." And God is saying,

“Yes, indeed you’ll flee.” And as they say, “Well, we’ll have swift horses.” Yes, indeed you’ll have swift horses. And corresponding to that, your pursuers will be swift. It’s his way of saying that you cannot escape this judgment that’s to come. And then he gives us this smoking, smoldering picture of desolation that’s couched in a flagstaff on top of a mountain and a signal on a hill. And all you see is destruction, and you think, “This is not encouraging at all.”

But as we see the thrice-mentioned Holy One of Israel, it’s reminding us that God is going to deal with sin wherever he finds it. As we look for sinners to tremble before the Holy God, saints alike should be trembling before the Holy God as well. But the amazing thing is that couched in all of this, we still see toward the tail end a measure of hope there. Because the flagstaff, that single flagstaff and a singular signal on a hill is sort of the passage’s way of giving us the imagery of the remnant, the remaining ones. It doesn’t present us with the word, the Hebrew words for “remnant” there. But instead, it illustrates the remnant to show that God is still preserving his own, even in the midst of it all.

And for those of you who feel like that is just not enough to lift my spirits, could we project verse 18? We trace our eyes down to verse 18, and we see the following: “The Lord waits to be gracious to you.” The word there, *wait*, is the same word that we find in Isaiah 8:17 that speaks of one who is eagerly waiting with expectation for the Lord to come and deliver. It’s the same word that’s used in Hosea 6:9 that speaks of robbers that are waiting to assault, to jump upon someone. With that same sort of picturesque description, it says, “Therefore, the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.” For the wayward, for the wandering, for those struggling in their walks, who find the song “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” resonating with them—“Prone to wander, Lord I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love / Here’s my heart, take and seal it / Seal it for thy courts above.” Verse 18 comes to you, illustrating that God waits eagerly to bless you.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We pray, Father, that you would be so kind as to seal your Word to the hearts of your people. This I ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.