

The King, Our Confidence, and His Initiative

Isaiah 31.1–32.20

Sermon

Thank you for your prayers while I was away this past wk. Attended a pastors' retreat in Louisville w about 100 pastors. Good time to be away, reflect on what G is doing in my life & life of our cong. Thank you for making such trips poss. Profitable for me & us.

1st flights in a while. Hadn't since Germanwings plane went down in Alps. Not exactly on my mind until I walked down jetway to board tin can of a plane, greeted by flight attendant: "who are you? what do I need to know about you? More imp, who's in the cockpit?" Whenever we board an airplane, we're paying an awful lot of money to entrust our lives to someone we've never met. & yet, notwithstanding tragedies like Alps, generally enough evidence to know three things about person in cockpit: they care about my well-being, know what they're doing, healthy/strong/powerful enough to get me home. All three nec. Two out of three won't do: care + knowledge - health, care + health - knowledge.

Text today much like flying in an airplane, a psg about trust & trustworthiness: Isa 31–32 (p. 494). Peo of Jeru faced existential crisis in form of Assyrian invaders. In the face of what seemed to be certain death, they pinned their hopes on three things they thought would save them. Like the 148 who tragically died in the Alps, peo of Jeru were in danger of putting their lives in unreliable hands. Unlike those who died in the Alps, though, G gave peo of Jeru a word of warning. [Read txt.]

As you can see I'm taking these two chaps as one unit. Reason: *woe* (31.1, cp. 28.1, 29.1, 30.1, 33.1). Chap divisions came later, these two seem to be one unit. But as you can also see I think there are three parts to this one unit: 31.1–9, 32.1–8, 32.9–20. Each of these shows G's peo **leaning** the wrong dir, boarding the wrong plane (so to speak).

- **power** (31.1–9). *horses* (1): revolutionized warfare bc of their strength, stamina, speed. Intro of *chariots* carrying 2 or 3 warriors: in addition to driver, carried archer & sometimes spearman. Lethal combo vs. footsoldiers. By this time a new use of horses arose: cavalry, i.e., warriors on horseback. Poss intro'd by Assyria. Note *multitude*. If written today, would be like relying on nat w most nuclear weaponry or best air force or navy. From all outward appearances, Egypt's power was worthy of trust. But G pronounces *woe* on them: they're as good as dead bc Egypt not worthy of trust.
- **wisdom** (32.1–8). Here not Egypt's power in view but their own *schemes* (7). Specific plans: *the hungry they leave empty, from the thirsty they withhold water* (6). Pic is of someone so greedy for wealth that they neglect those in need. Doesn't make sense to give to the poor: hurts my bottom line, doesn't advance my cause. "After all, might it not discourage them to take pers responsibility for their predicament? Better to hold on to it myself than to risk corrupting the poor." G's response is strong & swift: such reliance on their own wise schemes *spreads evil about the L* (7). Their very conduct says the wrong thing about G. Ergo their wisdom will fail.
- **abundance** (32.9–20). Words directed against *women* (9): might be a specific group of women in view or women of a particular class. Whichever it is, psg not saying women more prone to complacency or false sense of security than men, as if women more naive than men. Remember this whole 1st half of book (chs. 1–39) a warning about false sense of security & a call to trust. Most notable violator: King Ahaz (ch. 8). What is true here: these women indicative of a whole soc that is leaning on their material wealth: *grape harvest* (10), *fine clothes* (11), *merriment* (12). They think all will go on as it has, grapes will keep coming, markets will be good & that will bring them great parties & the finer things in life. Relying on goodness of creation. But G says it'll all be gone *in little more than a year* (10). They think they can count on good economy, fine grape production, favorable markets. But it's all passing & their trust will fail.

These three function like **rungs on a ladder**. Jeru was faced w death at the hands of Assyria, so they trusted power to give them life. That's the 1st rung. But once their lives were secure, they needed to fill it w stuff, so they leaned on their own wisdom to give them wealth. That's the 2nd rung. & once they were in relative ease, they relied on abundance to give them pleasure. That's the 3rd rung. What they wanted was life, wealth, & pleasure, & what they trusted to get them there was power, wisdom, & abundance.

No dift for us. We're just the same. When we feel threatened, we look to powerful peo who can provide cover for us. Maybe it's a poli leader that we believe will protect our interests. Or maybe it's an influential person at work & you're doing everything to stay in her good graces. If she approves of you, your career is safe, so you ingratiate yourself to her in order to save your life. When our resources seem inadequate, we look to our own schemes to get us ahead. We care nothing for the peo under our charge unless they improve our bottom line. We lie, cheat, & swindle to turn a profit. We'll cut corners to save a few bucks. & we'll ruin anyone who stands in our way. And once we've made it, we'll lean on our good things—food, drink, clothes, houses, parties—to bring us endless pleasure—the good life. We believe power will give us life, wisdom will give us wealth, and abundance will give us pleasure. & we're wrong. Those we lean on will fail us, our schemes will only bring us trouble. & our abundance is never enough. Looking to power/wisdom/abundance to bring us life/wealth/pleasure is a mirage.

And yet—in one very imp sense, our instincts are right. We believe power will give us life, wisdom will give us wealth, abundance will give us pleasure. & we're dead wrong if we locate those things in ourselves. But we're also wrong if we say that all those things are inherently evil. Nothing inherently sinful about life/wealth/pleasure. In fact this very psg celebrates all these as blessings from G to his peo. Nor is there anything inherently wrong w power/wisdom/abundance.

What is wrong: finding power/wisdom/abundance ultimately in human beings—ourselves or others. Like a little child who really believes their dad is the strongest pers who ever lived. Or like someone telling another about the most amazing adventure they've ever been on—only to find out they're talking to an astronaut. Or like extolling a caricature artist in Central Park when you've never been to the Met. G is saying, "You're so fascinated by Egypt's power or your cunning wisdom or your apparent abundance. But have you ever looked at Me? Do you know who I am?" Where this psg turns is w a revelation of G's **char**:

- **power** (31.4–9). G compares himself to a *lion* (4). Even if a whole band of shepherds stands up to it, lion not afraid. So Assyria is like nothing before G & he predicts that he will do away w Judah's enemies wo a single human sword. That's power! Power does bring life—but it's G's power, not human power.
- **wisdom** (31.2). Jeru thinks they're so wise to run to Egypt? Well, Isa says, G's wisdom isn't too shabby either. He can snuff out Assyria wo Egypt's help. In fact he can take out Egypt too while he's at it (*those who help*, 3) & peo of Jeru who ran to Egypt (*those who are helped*, 3). Wisdom does bring wealth—but it's G's wisdom, not human wisdom.
- **abundance** (32.15). Relying on next year's grape harvest would prove fatal, but G can turn a desert into a fertile field. Earthly abundance comes from him. Points to G's goodness: pictured as a bird hovering over its nest to protect its young (31.5). G knows his peo, loves his peo, cares for his peo. Why rely on goodness of creation when you can rely on goodness of Creator?

See what G is claiming in these vss? Same thing I said at beg of msg about pilots: care about my well-being (goodness), know what they're doing (wisdom), healthy/strong enough to get me home (power). Only worth trusting if you are good, wise, & powerful. 2 out of 3 won't do. Conf Art 1: "Creator & Sustainer of all things, & He rules all things in holiness, wisdom, & love to bring about His eternal good purposes."

& bc he is good, sovereign, powerful, he doesn't wait for us to act. One of the beautiful elements of this psg: divine **initiative**. Nowhere in chs. 31–32 do we find G waiting for his peo to renounce their confidence in lesser things, & turn & trust him. No, G steps in & acts, & his actions bring about the response in his peo that he wants.

To those who rely on power, G takes initiative as their Defender (31.5–9). They would not need Egypt to push Assyria back; G could do it all by himself. To those who rely on wisdom, G shows himself to be their Righteous King (32.1a) who rules with justice (1b), spread knowledge of G (3–4), banish injustice (5–8), and so refresh the hearts of his peo (2). To those who rely on abundance, G shows himself to Giver of the Spirit (15). This would've reminded the peo of the days of the judges when the Sp would come on individuals (e.g., Samson, Gideon) for specific missions. But here G pours out his Sp "on us" (15), not just on a leader. How the Sp brings security to his peo is not specifically stated here, only that the Sp's presence makes the desert fertile, establishes justice, and brings about peace.

& see friends, those three things are precisely what G did in precisely that order! 1st he showed himself to be his peo's Defender. Not only in beating back Assyria when they were on Jeru's doorstep. Something far more profound. Isa "compares G to a mother bird which flies back & forth over her nest when a predator is near, both to distract the enemy & if nec to offer herself as a victim to save her little ones" (Oswalt, 574). G proved himself to be his peo's Defender when J offered himself as a victim to save his peo. Image of bird ultimately fulfilled in X. But unlike a bird killed by a predator while defending her young, J did not stay dead. Death of a mother bird means death for baby birds. But death of J means life for his peo bc J did not stay dead. Rose from the dead to prove that he is the K who reigns in righteousness. 2nd act of G here: J ruling over his peo, setting up others to administer his rule for him. But how could these vicereagents, these undershepherds to the Good

Shepherd, rule his peo w justice & bring them peace & hope & rest? 3rd act of G: he pours out his Sp (3.15). Throughout NT G declares that this reality is now (Jn 20.21–22; Acts 2.1–4; Rom 8.14–17; Gal 4.6). These three acts of divine initiative—defending his peo, ruling them w justice, pouring out his Spirit—were fulfilled in exactly that order—at the cross, resurrection, Pentecost. Chaps entirely fulfilled? No, not yet. Must acknowledge when you read this txt that some of this hasn't come true yet. But just as surely some of it has. & what has been fulfilled inspires confidence that the rest will come. Ergo Conf: “He rules all things in holiness, wisdom, & love to bring about His eternal good purposes to redeem a peo for himself & restore His fallen creation, to the praise of His glorious grace.” If G didn't take initiative, we'd all be doomed.

What do we do w this passage?

1. **Rest in G's defense.** G as lion protecting his peo. Been a difficult week for many of us, few wks for some of us. Image inspires hope in us: G will not leave us to adversary.
2. **Rule w G's justice.** G has called some of us to leadership roles & he's poured out his Sp on us so that we would rule w justice. In our soc, auth viewed as almost inherently evil, but ought not be that way. Diff bet authority & authoritarian. & for us who are G's peo w G's Sp, we have opp to rule w G's justice & bring peace/hope/joy to those we govern. Esp. true for ch leaders: G's Sp on us to lead.
3. **Rely on G's Sp.** Easy to hear “peo rely on power/wisdom/abundance” & excuse ourselves. You know what betrays us? Prayerlessness. To the extent we fail to pray, to that extent we are relying on lesser gods. But G has poured out his Sp on you. Talk to him, confess your need of him, even when you seem to have enough power/wisdom/abundance.
4. **Reflect G's generosity.** G's justice makes us generous. Should be a peo marked by generosity to poor & needy.