

Promised Release

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
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Isaiah 30:19
(Holman Christian Standard Bible)

For you people will live on Zion in Jerusalem and will never cry again. He will show favor to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears, He will answer you.

The purpose of this text is to extend hope to a people who did not deserve hope. This is the beauty of this passage and part of the overwhelming beauty of our God. He gives favor to people who do not deserve it. Their rebellious actions make mercy seem questionable. God appears to be illogical; why give mercy to a people who didn't care about Him, live as if He didn't exist, or worse, knowing He existed yet refused to submit, why give them such kindness? Israel's defiance of God made mercy not only seem questionable but unbelievable.

It's hard to believe God's mercy especially for those who have come to see and feel their sin. I'll never forget when I really saw my sin and felt its entire weight and gravity; I couldn't believe God would forgive me. I felt so wicked and undeserving of any kind consideration, so that God being merciful to me seemed impossible. That's what happens when you see your sin—the idea of God's mercy becomes a very difficult thing.

If you feel this way, I want to offer hope to you. Our text is a proof of the hope God extends to you this morning. The people of Judah had willfully renounced God who had miraculously delivered them time and again. They worshipped idols made with their own hands and snubbed the Lord God who had made them. Upon hearing that the super power of the day, the Assyrian king, Sennacherib and his mighty army was on their way to invade and conquer them, they again insulted the Lord. They tried to arrange a treaty to make an ally out of a former enemy. Instead of humbling themselves before God, admitting their sin, they attempted to get Egypt to help them militarily. This was a violation of God's law.

But God is merciful. He intervened. He destroyed the Assyrians that surrounded Jerusalem in one night. One hundred eighty-five thousand soldiers killed by an angel of God while they slept. You would think Judah would be cured of its wandering, sinful idolatry and they would love and serve God forever. You would think so, but they didn't. They went back to their God-despising routine. God sent prophet after prophet warning them and pleading for their return, but to no avail.

How many gracious warnings will you refuse? How many times will you say to no to a God who loves you? Can't you see He has spared you as He spared Judah from the Assyrians? In your case it wasn't a marauding army; it was a close call with death, or financial ruin, or your family kept together after you almost destroyed it. Perhaps this kind God of grace spared you a sexually transmitted disease? Could your accident that should have proven fatal been God's mercy? Was your child's recovery from a serious sickness your Assyrian moment?

If you stop right now and go back over your own history, your own life, you will see many times where God in His kindness, although undeserved by you, spared and delivered you of a great tragedy. Here you are, bitter that He didn't spare you of the one that He in His wisdom allowed and you're not thankful for all the times He spared you. How ungrateful!

The question for you to think about is how have you lived since those mercies? Have you, instead of snubbing God, yielded yourself to Him? Have you yielded to His love and His peace? Have you given yourself to Him and shown Him your gratitude for what He has done and if not, I ask you why? Why have you not? How long must you tempt the goodness of God?

Judah defied God's goodness for over a hundred years after this. Talk about the longsuffering of God. After that Assyrian event one hundred and three years went by before God brought to pass the warning of verses 1-17 of Isaiah 30. God is very merciful and patiently kind but He will keep His word and He did to the Judeans. His punishment came on Judah and He gave them over to a far more powerful and worse enemy than the Assyrians. The Babylonians and Jerusalem was destroyed and for 70 years many Jews were foreign captives in Babylon.

Now here's the hard thing to believe, in judgment God was being merciful. That Babylonian captivity was the straw that broke the idol's back. Never again would Judah serve foreign gods or idols. It cured them once and for all.

Sadly, even though Judah would not ever again bow down to idols, they still would not obey God. They continued in their disobedience. Their hearts were unaltered. That's why these verses, 18-26, are so remarkable to me. In the middle of senseless insubordination God said He would grant mercy. In the height of your defiance, He stoops low and forgives. He would forgive Judah for its stubborn defiance. It's this quality of God that makes grace unbelievable, too good to be true, but it is true—God is a God of mercy and He enjoys it. He enjoys being merciful to people.

So, to my rebellious friend—and if you're a child who understands right and wrong and you're not a Christian, you're rebellious. If you're 99 and not living your life according to God, you're in rebellion—I want you to know something: God has enough mercy for you. It's called mercy for a reason. Will you call on Him for grace's life-giving power? Will you ask Him to bless you with the power that you do not deserve but will give because He loves you? He is waiting to hear you cry out to Him. Cry out to Him! I know there is a pride that sounds right that would say, "But I've lived my whole life in defiance of Him. Why now should I give Him my life? That seems a little selfish to me." It might seem like a good reason, you've lived a good life and you've done it your

way and now why should you give Him whatever time you have left.

I heard of an instance like that not too long ago. A pastor's father had lived his entire life in sin and refusal of God's salvation and on his deathbed this pastor went to him, pleading with him, knowing that when his dad breathed his last he would never see him again. He pleaded with his father, "Dad, please, it's not too late. Will you let God save you? Ask Him to forgive you." The father's reply was, "Son, I know that. But I've lived all of these years and I've not sought Him for anything. Now on my deathbed, why should I do that? No, I've made my bed, I will lie in it." The man died without God.

That seems to the spirit of the natural man, sensible. Yeah, you live your whole life in defiance of God and then in the last moment you turn to Him just because you want to be spared an eternal hell. That sounds pretty selfish. Let me tell you this is how unbelievable God's mercy is, that in your last breath though you've lived your entire life, every breath a defiance against God, God still will be merciful to you and He will extend to you a kindness that is illogical. It doesn't make sense, but oh, does it ever show how good and loving and kind God is.

Am I encouraging people to live in disregard of God, waste your life on your sin and then wait to give Him your life on your deathbed? No, a thousand times no! I'm not encouraging this. But I'm saying to someone who has argued this with himself that your argument does not hold water. It is the height of defiance yet again. It does not do God any honor when even in the latter days you will still say no when His hands are outstretched to you. No, it doesn't make sense that you would refuse such love and not glorify the God of grace. So come. Children, men, women, come. God is merciful to forgive.

God has made a covenant. That's what this text is about. God has made a covenant with His people. We're talking about Judah, old Israel, a people with whom God had made a covenant that goes back all the way to Abraham. God had promised Abraham that out of his descendants He would save a people—an unconditional promise to redeem.

God keeps His promises. The Bible says, "it is impossible for God to lie." His word and covenant are immutable, meaning unchangeable. They are unalterable because God is unalterable. The Bible goes on to say that the fact it is impossible for God to lie should do something for us, it says that we should "have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us." Because God doesn't lie, we ought to be the most hopeful and a people of strong consolation.

God has made a covenant with His church and the covenant with the church and with Israel will one day intersect when God does another miraculous work for the Jews and brings many of them into the church by faith in the sacrifice of Christ. He has pledged Himself to all His people, and no matter how it looks now; nothing will make God's Word fall to the ground and not come to pass. He will do what He said He would.

God has made a promise concerning this church. He has promised a better day, when His glory and presence will be so manifested in us that many wonderful things that we pray for now will come to pass. Many will come to Christ in repentance and faith. Many homes will be impacted for good and peace. People in this area will witness for themselves the God of Scripture. They will see the presence of God in you.

In this series of sermons preaching through this passage we will explain the promise God will bring to us. From verse 19 to 26 God lists many blessings He would pour out on Judah as He brought them out of Babylonian captivity and restored them to their homeland. But because the Lord has made this passage alive to me as a promise for us, I bring you the word of the Lord. There are spiritual parallels in this passage that are for us. God did bring the Jews out of Babylon and fulfilled His promise. He restored them to their homeland and gave them great prosperity for several years until they rebelled again. But what He did then has a parallel to us today.

I want to show you two things and then we'll be done.

I. A SELF-IMPOSED CAPTIVITY ENDED

This is one of the great promises He made to Judah that I believe have application to us.

In verses one through seventeen God prophesied that He was going to deliver them over to an enemy and Egypt would not be able to help them, they would be nothing more than a stick lodged in their hand, an added torment. Of course, the Babylonian captivity came and they were exported to a land they did not know.

They were dislodged. Their surroundings were not normal. They were not at home. And everything seemed out of place in their lives. When you choose to refuse God's mercy and not repent, you are saying, *I choose to impose upon myself a captivity. I impose upon myself a bondage and a slavery that God did not intend.*

Their joy was gone. They could not sing the songs of Zion. An example of that is found in Psalms 137:1-4 when the psalmist in Babylon said,

“By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps Upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, And those who plundered us requested mirth, Saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How shall we sing the LORD’S song In a foreign land?”

The Babylonians wanted them to sing one of their traditional songs from back home and they refused. “We can't. We've hung up our instruments in the trees, we have no intention of singing any song of joy because there is no joy in our hearts. Our hearts have been broken. We can't sing

a happy song.” They were powerless and they were oppressed.

When you and I defy God and do not obey Him faithfully, we give ourselves over to oppression as they did. Would it be safe to characterize your life as a life greatly oppressed? “I seem to be hemmed in on every hand,” you say, “I feel like I’m in a slow cooker where there is constant pressure. Sunshine? I don’t know what that’s like in my heart. It’s all dark and cloudy.”

There was no victory for seventy years. They were a captive people. They may not have been in Egypt where they were slaves, but what I want you to see is that they had done this to themselves.

Their slavery in Egypt was not because of any sin on Israel’s part. They were in Egypt by God’s direction and will. But when God delivered them and set them free, He established them in their own land. The Babylonian captivity, on the other hand, was God’s response to Judah’s sin. They were in Babylon because of their own choice.

What does this have to do with our church? Let me give you the theological foundation for what I’m about to say.

The Christian also has been set free.

Just as Israel was set free from Egyptian slavery and given a land of promise and plenty, a land flowing with milk and honey. We, too, have received spiritual freedom and abundance. Did not Jesus say, “He who believes in Me, out of him shall flow rivers of living water”? We, too, have been set free from our oppressor—sin. The master has been broken, his power and spell is done with, I’m free. The Bible makes this absolutely clear. We are no longer slaves of sin. When I sin now, I do it because I choose to, not because there is some motivating power that makes me to do it.

I’m free, which, I guess you could say, makes my sin all the more grievous, all the more terrible. I do have a choice in the matter and so do you who are my brothers and sisters.

We are no longer slaves of sin. However, having said that, we can bring on ourselves a self-imposed captivity.

Let me give you the Apostle Paul’s argument that you can bring on yourself a self-imposed captivity of sin.

*“Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.”
(Romans 6:11-12)*

By giving that command in the conclusion of his theological explanation of our freedom from sin it only means then, therefore, we can go back into a self-imposed captivity of sin. A Christian can go back—he can’t go back to the kingdom of darkness, he’s no longer under the

rulership of sin in the sense he was before salvation, when he was a victim of his own nature and delighted in his sin. While you can't go back under its dominion in the kingdom of Satan, sin can have dominion in you. You're not *under* it but it's *in* you having great power to oppress and bring captive your heart.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” (Galatians 5:1)

These two passages prove a Christian can be enslaved to a yoke of bondage after salvation. There is no plausible argument against it. It is possible for you and me to be entangled in the yoke of bondage again. That's why the first temptation, after spiritual victories, is the most dangerous and the most vital. If you say no, by the grace of God, you don't allow sin to begin its occupation. When you have a season of great victories, for example you have experienced an increase in your prayer life and study of the Word, you feel like God is walking right beside you, filling you with the joy of the Lord, and then temptation strikes. It always will. “Where did this come from,” you wonder. “I didn't think I was still susceptible to this. I didn't think this enticed me anymore. I thought I had victory.”

But here you have a choice and it's crucial that right now you fight for your soul. Because if you don't the first giving in to temptation only fortifies the flesh, makes it stronger and harder to resist the next time you're tempted. That's how this thing begins to take you captive.

Stay. Fight. Cut off hands. Gouge out eyes. Do what you must to resist that initial temptation after spiritual blessing and victory because if you can nip it then, if you can win then, you have dealt a great blow to sin's mastery in your soul.

Sin leads to oppression and even bondage. In Proverbs 5:22 Solomon says,

“His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, And he is caught in the cords of his sin.”

Sin makes a slave of whoever sins, says Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, I'm not preaching to you and not preaching to myself. We have brought upon ourselves a self-imposed captivity. We do desire to serve the Lord. Oh yes, we desire to serve Him much and we solidly plant one of our feet in the kingdom of God, but it's the other foot that wants to dabble like a child with his toe in the shallow end of the water. “Shall I or shall I not, is it too cold or too hot?” We still keep our other toe in this world and that is a self-imposed captivity that robs you of this greater joy and manifestation of the presence and power of God. I'm pleading with us today. I'm preaching to myself too. I need to listen to this sermon. I need to know that when the Bible says, “Avoid the appearance of evil,” it gives no room to play with sin. You can't toy with it. You will never win.

One wandering look is all it takes. And ladies, before you think I'm only talking to the guys about

what their eyes look upon, I'm talking to your heart. They eye-gate it not just for the lust for sex but for every other pleasure this world offers. It begins by seeing. Then the mind begins to engage and before long you are already feeling the oppression of sin. You are weighted down and the victory of Christ's presence is no longer experienced.

Let me direct you to the good news.

II. THE JUDGMENT ENDED

To return to Zion was the very sign and evidence that the discipline of God was finished. God allowed Israel to go into Babylon into captivity but He said He was going to do it for their good and now they were allowed to return.

Verses eighteen through twenty-six come to pass. Daniel begins to pray at the conclusion of the seventy years of captivity, having known that Jeremiah had prophesied seventy years the Jews would be in Babylonian captivity. He begins to pray for their release. Finally God begins to raise up an Ezra and an Nehemiah and Cyrus, a pagan king to declare what God had prophesied hundreds of years before—that God would use that king to get Israel back to their homeland.

It happened, proving that God's discipline had done its work. It was done.

Zion was the place where God's presence and Spirit dwelt. It was home. We too have a realm of living that is home to us. It's called the liberty of the Spirit. It is the place we can enjoy our liberty to obey God and live in His service. I'm free from sin, which means I have freedom to obey God, which I could never have done under the enslavement of sin. I can live in His service. Oh what a freedom, what a joy.

Some brother, some sister here is longing for that freedom because you have let sin have too much power. It's hard to obey God right now because sin has such a grip. Do you know the Bible says to be careful about your sin? Don't even get angry and let anger turn to sin.

In Ephesians 4:26-27 it says, "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil." Unjustifiable anger opens the heart to give Satan a place from which to launch attack. Not from without but from within. God has afforded us a freedom from Satan's operation from within. There is potential deliverance.

God promised Israel they would not cry anymore. What does He mean by this? It does not mean they would never feel distress or suffer any more. Rather it means they would not weep over the absence of God. They wouldn't weep over the lack of the spiritual senses being able to experience the presence of God who had turned them over to discipline. They would never again cry out, as you often pray, "Where are you God?"

If you don't feel the presence of God—we're not talking about emotional feeling, we're talking about a spiritual sense—you're in a self-imposed captivity because of your sin. Every Christian, please listen. If you cannot be assured and your spirit does not sense the continual presence of God, you are in a self-imposed captivity because of some sin in your life. There is only one other reason why you would feel that and it's because God is testing you, but the most likely answer is a self-imposed captivity. God is chastening you.

Hebrews 12:11 makes it clear,

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward,”

It is not a delightful experience. It is most trying and difficult. However, there is a promise in this verse. It is the promise that I'm living for. I'm living for what happens afterwards, after chastening.

“it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

Trained. God's school is like no other seminary I know. It's not easy and it's very practical and it always works if you submit to it.

You cannot runaway from this, brother and sister. God will purify His people. We suffer from a condition that is caused by the silence of God. But if we endure we will weep no more and His manifested presence will be more real than it's ever been.

I want to end by telling you why I know this promise is true. The promise of this text is true to me and I believe it for this church and not just Judah of old. We're not going back to Zion in the literal sense, it's just the application, the spiritual parallel that is true for us. I know it because in September 1992, I was praying one afternoon. It was a beautiful day, the windows were up, we didn't have the air conditioning on, I was alone as Karen and the boys had gone into town to do some grocery shopping. I was praying and God spoke to me. He spoke to me from Jeremiah 29:10-11. I'm going to read the verse to you but before I do you need to know something.

I was saved six years before this event took place, and I had often referred to those six years as “my captivity.” Sometimes I affectionately called it the “backside of the desert” like Moses, caring for my father in law's sheep, only in this case it wasn't sheep but grandchildren. And on that particular September day I was praying and God spoke to me.

“After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

After the verse, God said these words, “As it was 70 years for Judah, it will be seven for you.” I

knew immediately what that meant. My heart had longed to be in fulltime ministry. Having been a preacher before I got saved I didn't really know how this thing worked. I struggled the first three years with the question of if I was even called. I finally got that theologically straightened out and then came this burden.

I would go to work and weep all the way from Carlisle County to Paducah and all the way back almost every single day. I wanted to preach the Gospel. I wanted to shepherd God's people. I wanted to be in a place where I could see God in a way I saw Him in this Book. On that day God said seven years. Well, it was the sixth year since my conversion. That only left one conclusion—by the end of 1993 I would be in a pastorate somewhere.

Karen and the boys got home and I ran out to greet them and to tell Karen God had spoken to me. I relayed to her that God had told me by the end of '93 we would be in a fulltime church. You should also know during this time—we had been offered at least two fulltime pastorates and God told me no both times. My eagerness to do the work of the Lord was tempered only by God's reign and bit in my mouth; otherwise I don't know what would have happened to me. Mercy kept us out of those places.

But then when this church became available in the summer of '93 this was not even on my radar. I said no three separate times to three separate individuals on the pulpit committee because I knew what was here. No disrespect to those of you who are still here from those days, but you can testify that it was not a place of ease. My predecessor went through great difficulty that probably led to his demise and departure. But God made it clear on November 7th that this is where I was supposed to be and by the first week of December we were moved into the parsonage. Do you know the day I was converted? December 1, 1986. Seven years to the week.

Now you know why I believe this text is a promise of God to us. He's promised me before and He kept His promise. I believe He's going to keep this one.

Endure and you will weep no more. Amen.