

What is God Saying?

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- [0 : 00] There's times in life where I think that we all do maybe a little bit more thinking than we would normally do. And as Jeremiah or as God says through Jeremiah in chapter 6, where we're standing at the crossroads.
- And that's often where we will find ourselves standing at the crossroads, taking stock of our lives and thinking about what is the way forward for us.
- In many ways that's what God was triggered, that's what God triggered in the minds and in the thoughts of the people of Israel through Jeremiah and through Isaiah.
- He was challenging them to stand at the crossroads to think about where they're going, the kind of lives they're living and to turn back to the living God. And that's a good thing to do and it's a good thing to stand at the crossroads sometimes and take stock of our lives.
- And occasionally God will kind of provoke that in us. Sometimes we're not that keen on doing it, but God, as he did for the Jews in the times of Isaiah and Jeremiah, he will do that for us, whether it be through life circumstances, health or myriad of other reasons.
- [1 : 22] And you know, amazingly ministers do that as well. Ministers take stock. And I'd like to do things slightly differently today. I'd like to be very personal and almost kind of apply this passage through my own experience and then look at what God says in the passage.
- Because in many ways I can be at a stage where I'm at a crossroads as well. Twenty years in the ministry, which you so beautifully marked the other week. Nearly half a century old, family growing up.
- You're at a stage where sometimes God is saying, take stock. You're at a crossroads, see what God is saying. And I think that's very important to do.
- It's very important to take stock. And it's important to look around in the same way that Jeremiah encourages the people. Stand at the crossroads and look.
- And as I stand at the crossroads of my life and as I look, I look in different areas, different sections. You learn a little bit about me and the way that ministers think.
- [2 : 33] And the kind of things that ministers think about you think dairy me. But when I look round to stand at the crossroads, I look round at God's world that I live in. I've almost lived in for half a century.
- See, it's fragile beauty. See, it's amazing complexity. And I'm more and more amazed by the human capacity for greatness.
- Even without God in their lives, astonishing compassion and love and commitment of so many people tragically, often with no reference to God in their lives.
- But more ordinarily, we see the broken shadow of the Almighty in people's lives and in the world in which I live. But it's triggered me to believe more in God rather than less.
- And despite the increasing secularization and the potential opposition or temptation that leads, the world that I carry on living in helps me to believe more.
- [3 : 43] I wonder what's happening. I wonder what's happening in the Middle East and all of the tensions and the brutality and the regime changes there.

I'm amazed at technology as I stand at the crossroads. I'm amazed at its potential for good, for the good of the gospel. I'm also amazed at its potential for evil.

And I wonder about the natural disasters that are happening in the world just now. Are they more than they have happened in the past? Are the reasons more geological or are they more apocalyptic?

I'm not sure. They certainly make me think. And I'm astonished, increasingly astonished, at our capacity to justify our own wealth at the cost of other people's poverty and the inequality of the world that we live in despite our sophistication.

I was reading this week about, surprisingly enough, I know, football. And the tragedy of the fact that last season, season 0809 Chelsea down in England, amassed 86 points in the Premier League.

[4 : 53] And for each of these points, they paid out £2 million in wages to their players. And you just stand and think, that's wrong.

And the world is most uneco and imbalanced. So I stand at the crossroads and I think of God's world. But I also think of my own church world.

That's where it becomes more personal to me in many ways. Think of Scottish Presbyterianism. Yes, ministers kind of think about Scottish Presbyterianism.

That's the kind of creatures that we are. We think of the general Christian good of the nation. Suppose the wing to which we belong is Presbyterianism. We wonder at the collapse in these days of the oneness of the national church.

We wonder what God is saying through that and what will happen as a result of these strange days. And in our own church, we wonder what is the way forward for us.

[6 : 00] We strive to think about the importance of reaching out, the importance of planting churches, the importance of spreading the gospel.

Do you know that a quarter of our, and this is a very, maybe it's an unspiritual application, but a quarter of our income as a church comes from five congregations.

But if each of us tithed from our salaries throughout the church, we would have five million pounds more with which to reach out with the gospel.

Then we see the changes in our own sung worship, the ability of the church to battle through that issue publicly and to come to different conclusions but still to work and live together, which is for good.

As I stand at the crossroads, I see a desperate need in our churches to be radical, to shake up the structures and to look after people and not just look after the institution and more personally, St. C's.

[7 : 17] I stand at the crossroads, it's a great privilege to serve the gospel here in St. C's. It's a family, and that's what we've striven for in the congregation.

It's changing all the time. There are many gifted souls here in the congregation serving Jesus Christ. Above all, what we are, do you know what we are?

We're a family of sinners saved by grace. That's what we are and that's what we have to be. And that's how we have to progress. There's no other basis in which we can progress until we recognize we're a family of sinners saved by grace.

We will be overwhelmed by mistakes in the congregation. We desperately need a generosity of spirit and a forgiving heart for and towards one another's weaknesses.

We can never just be a social club. If that's what we think we are, then we're doomed for the sake of the gospel. We have a desperate need, all of us, a desperate need not just to pray on our own, but to pray together.

[8 : 31] I want to say a little bit more about that, to pray and to serve together, to seek God's breath, God's Holy Spirit together, to have a passion for the lost together, to share a vision together, to stand at the crossroads.

I see that need for it in our own congregation. This is my 1,573rd recorded sermon.

Stand at the crossroads and you think maybe somebody else should take this congregation on from here. Maybe time for change. Maybe someone could do that better and as their new leadership comes in, maybe we could and should be considering changes.

Stand at the crossroads and ask for God's guidance and ask for the way that we need to be lost. And that, of course, brings me to my own personal world.

Not just the church world and the world that I see around, but if you stand at the crossroads, only to look at our own personal world and take stock, we need to be standing at the crossroads in our lives, just as God encouraged the people here to do so, and to consider the way that we are to go and to walk in it.

[9 : 53] I've known untold blessings. I've been a recipient of overwhelming grace, but at my stage in life, I'm particularly aware of the temptation to be complacent, to be professional, without being personally seeking godliness in my soul.

Great burden that many of us at middle age will come to the fear of finishing badly. That's very forcibly come to me recently.

So easy to speak about all the different pressures at different stages and come through different stages and think we can relax, but many, many people in the Christian faith finish badly because they let their guards down, aware of the dangers of theological schizophrenia, believing and knowing and accepting truth, studying all the time, but allowing the truths to stop beyond before my heart.

As we were seeing on Wednesday night, the importance of what we believe affecting what we do and what we think and how we are in terms of living for God's glory.

I'm less and less inclined to care about institutions and convention and structures. I'm much more inclined because I see so much brokenness and hurt and so little compassion in the church.

[11 : 41] I'm much more inclined towards bringing the healing power of the gospel to people and to see people being transformed by the grace of God.

Always in my Christian life, it's been my fellow Christians that have caused me the most pain and most grief. And I know that because that's probably the same for me with others, knowing and seeing and understanding the depth of my own selfishness.

But longing for Christ's power and his transforming healing for me and for others. My personal world. I've opened there just a little bit as I stand at the crossroads, got a glimpse into the kind of things that ministers think about.

That we spend our time considering, that I spend my time considering. There's a bit much more, of course, that's maybe just a glimpse into it.

But as you stand at the crossroads in your life, and maybe you don't feel you're at that stage of standing at a crossroads, but it will be, and it may be that God is saying to you today, this is a time for it.

[12 : 59] Stand at the crossroads of your life. What is our response? When we stop and take stock and think about our lives as we're growing older, as our families are changing, as our friends, as our...

You know, a lot of people in the congregation just now are having concerns and burdens about their work, their jobs, whether their jobs are secure, whether they can get jobs, and they're going to be made unemployed, and what they're going to do with their lives.

All these questions are very meaningful and very real for people. What do we do? God's answer is very simple for us, and it remains simple for us, and it remains a strategy for our lives.

In Isaiah chapter 30 where we read a passage where we read where God was encouraging them to consider Him and to think about Him.

In verse 19, it says, So people of Zion who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more how gracious will he be when you cry for help. And that's the whole emphasis of Isaiah and Jeremiah at this point, that he's wanting the people of God.

[14 : 11] God is wanting His own covenant people to cry out to Him for help. And that's where we take standing at the crossroads, and when we stop and think about our lives, we come to the living God and we cry out to Him for help.

That's what we do. It's very simple. It's very humbling. In the complexity of our lives, it's the strategy, par exilis, that we go into God's presence and cry out to Him.

It's not weakness, it's strength and honesty, because we cry out to the living God. We cry out to the sovereign God. We cry out to the loving God who knows and understands and longs for us to respond in such a way.

It's important that we are stripped before God and that we're honest before God and that we cry for help. He's not looking in our lives for attainment. He's not looking for standards to reach before we come into His presence.

He's not looking for our own self-discovery. He's looking for us to be dependent, recognizing our relationship with Him, coming to Him in faith, both initially for salvation and then in an ongoing way as we look at our lives.

[15 : 39] We look at the world, we look at our world, we look at our heart and we see all these different things. And they can overwhelm us when we come to the living God. We cry for help.

And we also recognize in so do God's great response, God's tremendous response. In Isaiah particularly as he speaks, as we look for the way to walk in, the way forward to walk in.

He longs, he says, to be gracious. I love these words. Verse 18 of Isaiah 30, Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you. He rises to show you compassion.

For the Lord is a God of justice, blessed are all those who wait on Him. He longs to be gracious. That's what He wants from us. Now we need to believe that and understand the character and nature of God as we cry out to Him.

That He longs, He goes out of His way, He rises to show His compassion. That's what He's about. That's His character. He knows our needs, He knows our sins, He knows our lusts, He knows our inconsistencies, He knows our bitterness, He knows what we think about others.

[17 : 00] He knows how we treat others. Yet as we cry out to Him, He longs to be gracious to us. And that's a great hit to our pride and to our sin.

Because it's knowing the character of the One into His presence we are coming that we are to do. We are to know Him as sovereign God and also as redeemer God.

Know His character as we cry out. It's not crying out to help to someone we don't know, someone that we don't believe in, someone who we haven't put our trust in.

That's not the kind of prayer that's been asked for here. And that's not the kind of understanding that we have. It is to know who He is, the compassionate and merciful but the God of justice also.

That word is a great word, that word compassion or mercy, however it's translated. The root seems to be that feeling that you will get when you look at a newborn baby.

[18 : 20] Trun and I went to visit Kezia and Ellie this week, tiny twins, lying across the bed, across the crib.

They're so small as opposed to end to end or whatever, tiny. And that's the initial reaction when you see a child like that.

Great compassion, longing to protect and love. And if that's the case for us, how much more for the parents?

That's the picture of God's compassion. The cry needs to come, the dependence needs to come. He longs to be gracious and He also, as we cry to Him for help, promises to guide you.

He's great words from verse 21. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way walk in it. He promises, as you stand at the crossroads of your lives, to guide your path and to show you what you're to do, how you're to live.

[19 : 34] That's a great thing, isn't it? Because much of our lives we wonder about what we're doing and what direction our life is to go in. And interestingly, it probably won't tell you the job to apply for or the redundancy package to accept or the person to marry or whatever it might be specifically.

But He will guide you through your life and your conscience to make the right decisions as you are submitting to Him. Because interestingly, the cry for help is also the way.

So in a sense, as we are crying, we are in that place where He wants us to be and that is primarily the way that we walk. It's on dependence upon Him, tangible trust.

If you flick back to verse 15 of Isaiah 30, sentence and rest is your salvation and quietness and trust is your strength. So as we live our lives, the way He wants us to live, the way forward from here that He wants us to live is to be living in tangible trust, trusting relationship with Him, taking Him at His word, literally, wrestling with His word, believing in His word, becoming students and disciples of His word, asking for more faith that He would reveal Himself through His word in your conscience so that you're guided by Him, being filled with His Holy Spirit, pleading His promises.

And in pleading His promises, we need to know His promises and know His character and implicitly rest in Him and in His character.

[21 : 29] And in the darkness, we trust Him to lead us and show us because He is light. And the same thing is true in terms of the way to walk, not just an ongoing trust when maybe every sinew of your body says, I want to make my own decisions here, I want to turn away from God, is to trust Him, but also it's in repentance and rest is your salvation and quietness and trust. Again, we come to that concept, that relational concept of repentance, where we're turning to Him all the time, where we're looking to Him, where He is our guide, and when it comes to repentance, it's as we know Him, we begin to know what He hates.

And when you love someone, then you want to avoid the things that they hate, doing the things that aggrieve them, doing the things that hurt them, doing the things that distance you from them, isn't that right?

And the same is true with God. So as we're turning to Him, there's naturally going to be that life of repentance, seeking His help to love Him and to love other people.

Remember, He's the Holy One of Israel. That's who we are having spoken about here. And as we seek His guidance and as we seek to walk in His way, there's no magical kind of formula.

It's a walk of repentance and quietness and trust and faith. We do know whatever God leads us, His blessings.

[23 : 10] For the Lord, O God, as a God of justice, verse 18, blessed are all those who wait for Him, who trust in Him. Kindness, grace, guidance, humility, wisdom, joy.

Even in the darkest moments, we look for these qualities to walk with us as we trust in Him. Can I just say one more thing?

It's tremendously important. And if we talk about standing across roads, if I talk about standing across roads and learning, or maybe thinking one thing more than others, I think more and more and more.

The Christian walk is about walking together. It's about walking together. This is written in the plural.

This is written to God's people. You plural, turn to the right or the left. Your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it.

[24 : 14] And God speaks to a people. And that is astonishingly important that this way that He wants us to walk is a way that involves linking arms spiritually.

It's utterly crucial. Because some of you are more prone to individualism and are maybe not social beings, naturally. Then the challenge is greater for you than for others who naturally are sociable one with another.

It is to walk together in this way, to lean on and to be accountable to one another, because that's the pattern that God gives. We are a body of people together.

And we walk His way and we outwork His way when we're together. It's not meant to be a lone journey. The church isn't meant to be full of lonely, misunderstood, ignored people.

We're all meant to look around. And we're all meant to support one another on this journey. If you've ever walked up a mountain, it's much easier walking up a mountain when you're supported and strengthened and encouraged and accompanied by friends than it is when you're on your own and you're not sure of the way and you're not sure if you're going the right way.

[25 : 43] And you've no one to encourage you. That is a picture of the Christian walk. We are a people who are to laugh together, but also to cry together and to say sorry together and accept forgiveness, to pray for one another and to be strong for one another.

Do you struggle with praying? Do you run out of things to pray for? They just look around you in church, take your directory home with you, make it your duty to recognize and know everybody who they are, and pray for their different needs as you hear and read their names, you'll begin to think about their situations and their needs, and you might even speak to them.

You might ask them, you might get to know, you might visit, you might help, you might be aware, you might bring a meal to whatever it happens to be.

And it's my greatest longing that we begin to walk together more and more and put aside our hurts and put aside our having been treated badly, our having been ignored or rejected.

And we walk with God's people together, walking together, because the danger will always be that we choose not to walk.

[27 : 10] That's exactly what happened in Jeremiah in the passage that we read in verse 16.

Stand at the crossroads and look, ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, walk in it, you will find rest for your souls, the same message. But you said, we will not walk in it.

But you said, we will not listen. That's the summary of the people. They wouldn't walk together, and they wouldn't listen together.

Now we can be in church, we can be in a community of believers. It doesn't mean that we're walking together, and it doesn't mean that we're listening together.

Just physically being here doesn't mean that we're a people together. If we're choosing not to respond to God's word in our lives, if we're not submitting our hearts to His Lordship, then we're rejecting Him.

[28 : 16] We're not walking together. It's good to stand at the crossroads. It's good to think about life, and it's good to think about the way that we're to walk in repentance and rest and trust, knowing the character and the nature of God.

And I hope that we can do that together and individually. But as individuals supporting one another together in that work, with all the forgiveness and all the grace and all the humility and all the repentance that is involved in that.

Amen. Let's put our heads briefly in prayer. Lord God, help us, we pray. Guide us and keep us, protect us, we ask. And enable us to walk your way.

Enable us to hear your voice. Enable us to be spirit-filled. Enable us to follow your paths, persevere us with grace.

Help us to live together as a people, as a community of believers, and the difficulty that sometimes involves even practically, because we live all over the city.

[29 : 28] Help us also to pray together our lifeblood, and may we be Christ-like among and with one another. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.