

Judgment on Syria and Ethiopia

Isaiah 17-18

Isaiah 17:1-3 - *“The burden against Damascus. ‘Behold, Damascus will cease from being a city, and it will be a ruinous heap. ² The cities of Aroer are forsaken; they will be for flocks which lie down, and no one will make them afraid. ³ The fortress also will cease from Ephraim, the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria. They will be as the glory of the children of Israel,’ says the Lord of hosts.”*

Background Notes

“Ephraim,” mentioned in verse 3, was the northern kingdom of Israel. It was sometimes known as Ephraim, after the name of its major tribe. The northern kingdom of Israel formed an alliance with Syria against the Assyrian Empire. Syria and Israel tried to force the southern kingdom of Judah to join them in this alliance against Assyria. (See Isaiah 7.)

The prophecy of Isaiah 7 was given again in Isaiah 17. Damascus would become a ruin (v1), and Ephraim’s fortress city would be destroyed (v3). All this came about when Assyria conquered Damascus, the capital of Syria, in 732 BC. Ten years later Assyria conquered Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord pronounced judgment against Syria.

Isaiah 17:4-14 – *“In that day it shall come to pass that the glory of Jacob will wane, and the fatness of his flesh grow lean. ⁵ It shall be as when the harvester gathers the grain, and reaps the heads with his arm; it shall be as he who gathers heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. ⁶ Yet gleaning grapes will be left in it, like the shaking of an olive tree, two or three olives at the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in its most fruitful branches,” says the Lord God of Israel.*

⁷ In that day a man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will have respect for the Holy One of Israel. ⁸ He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands. He will not respect what his fingers have made, nor the wooden images, nor the incense altars.

⁹ In that day his strong cities will be as a forsaken bough and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel; and there will be desolation, ¹⁰ because you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not been mindful of the Rock of your stronghold, therefore you will plant pleasant plants and set out foreign seedlings. ¹¹ In the day you will make your plant to grow, and in the morning you will make your seed to flourish; but the harvest will be a heap of ruins in the day of grief and desperate sorrow. ¹² Woe to the multitude of many people who make a noise like the

roar of the seas, and to the rushing of nations that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! ¹³ The nations will rush like the rushing of many waters; but God will rebuke them and they will flee far away, and be chased like the chaff of the mountains before the wind, like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. ¹⁴ Then behold, at eventide, trouble! And before the morning, he is no more. This is the portion of those who plunder us, and the lot of those who rob us."

Did you notice the phrase that was used three times in verses 4-14? "*In that day*" was used in verses 4, 7 & 9. In our studies of Isaiah, we have already learned that when Isaiah used the phrase "*in that day*," he was generally referring to "the Day of the Lord."

We learned that "The Day of the Lord" refers to **any** time that the Lord intervenes in the affairs of nations. There was an historical aspect to "the Day of the Lord," and there is also an eschatological (future) aspect to "the Day of the Lord." We discussed the dual aspects regarding Babylon in Isaiah 13-14. Historical Babylon was conquered in the past, but a "Babylon" of the End Times will be conquered in the future (Revelation 17-18).

In Isaiah 17, the two aspects of the Day of the Lord were seen in this alliance between Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel. The historical alliance came to nothing, as Assyria conquered both nations in Isaiah's day. The Assyrian Empire conquered Syria in 732 BC, and the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC.

After Assyria's invasion, the fields no longer produced a good harvest (v4-5). The few people left were like the few olives left unpicked at the top of the olive trees (v6). Their cities were forsaken, and their land became desolate (v9). All this judgment came because they had forgotten the true God of salvation and refuge (v10). No wonder the Land was unproductive and the people were in pain (v11).

The people of Syria and Israel were forced to recognize that the God of Israel, whom they had forsaken, was the one true God, and the idols they worshiped were false gods (v7-8).

Verse 14 was literally fulfilled when the Assyrians attacked Jerusalem in 701 BC (Isaiah 37). In the evening the sight of the huge Assyrian army brought terror to the people of Jerusalem. But King Hezekiah prayed to the Lord for help, and overnight 185,000 Assyrian troops died. In the morning the mighty army was no more (v14)! That's the historical aspect to the phrase "*in that day*," or the Day of the Lord, in Isaiah 17.

In the End Times history will repeat itself, and the eschatological or future aspect of this prophecy will be fulfilled. Unbelieving Israel will make an alliance with the Gentiles for protection, and a seven-year covenant will be made. But "*in that day*," God will bring the alliance to nothing, and a number of Jews and Gentiles will turn to the Lord. The Lord will preserve and protect the godly remnant when all nations come against them - even though the enemies come with the roar and rush of mighty waters.

What a deliverance that will be, for the godly remnant who trust in the Lord in that future day (v12-14)! Even though nations will “roar “at His people like mighty waters, God will rebuke those enemies. They will flee like chaff that blows away in the wind (v13).

2. The Lord pronounced judgment against Ethiopia.

Isaiah 18 - “Woe to the land shadowed with buzzing wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, ² which sends ambassadors by sea, even in vessels of reed on the waters, saying, “Go, swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth of skin, to a people terrible from their beginning onward; a nation powerful and treading down, whose land the rivers divide.”

³ All inhabitants of the world and dwellers on the earth, when he lifts up a banner on the mountains, you see it; and when he blows a trumpet, you hear it.

⁴ For so the Lord said to me, “I will take My rest, and I will look from My dwelling place like clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.” ⁵ For before the harvest, when the bud is perfect and the sour grape is ripening in the flower, He will both cut off the sprigs with pruning hooks and take away and cut down the branches. ⁶ They will be left together for the mountain birds of prey and for the beasts of the earth; The birds of prey will summer on them, all the beasts of the earth will winter on them.

⁷ In that time a present will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth of skin, and from a people terrible from their beginning onward; a nation powerful and treading down, whose land the rivers divide— to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, to Mount Zion.”

Isaiah 18 is not an easy chapter to interpret, but the nation that the Lord denounced in this chapter was Ethiopia (or Cush) of Isaiah’s day. Ethiopia was a land of locusts, with buzzing wings (v1). It was a land divided by the waters of the Upper Nile (v2&7). This was a land of warriors who were tall and clean-shaven (v2&7). Like the Egyptians, the Ethiopians made boats from the papyrus plant (v2).

Like many other nations in Isaiah’s time, Ethiopia was pursuing an anti-Assyrian policy. Ethiopia sent ambassadors in seaworthy papyrus boats to pressure King Hezekiah to join in a rebellion against Assyria. The southern kingdom of Judah sent a swift message to the Ethiopians. But Judah wanted no part of an alliance with Ethiopia against Assyria, because King Hezekiah was not looking for military alliances – he was looking to the Lord for deliverance (v2-3). And Ethiopia was conquered by the Assyrians - but Judah was not, because Judah looked to the Lord for protection.

When the Assyrians themselves suffered, the world would know (v3) - but Assyria would be cut down **in God’s timing** (v4-5). On the mountains of Israel surrounding Jerusalem, God miraculously cut down Sennacherib and the Assyrian army in 701 BC. The dead were left on the hillsides for the birds and beasts of prey (v6).

There’s some good news for Ethiopia in verse 7: “*In that time a present will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth of skin, and from a people terrible from their beginning onward; a nation powerful and treading down, whose land the rivers divide - to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, to Mount Zion.*”

We believe that Isaiah was once again looking forward to the End Times in verse 7. There may have been a partial fulfillment of this prophecy when Sennacherib was defeated at the time of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah. But *“in that time,”* during the future millennial kingdom of our Lord, Ethiopia will be one of the nations that will bring gifts to Jerusalem, the Lord’s capital city.

Psalms 68 is a Messianic psalm, and parts of this psalm certainly look forward to our Lord’s future kingdom on this earth. Psalm 68:29 says, *“Because of Your temple at Jerusalem; Kings will bring presents to You.”* And verse 31 says, *“Envoys will come out of Egypt; Ethiopia will quickly stretch out her hands to God.”*

So the Lord pronounced judgment against Ethiopia, but in that prophecy there was also good news for the Ethiopia of the future.

Practical Application

Let God pick the time!

In verse 5-6, God promised that the Assyrian threat would come to an end. But, God said, His intervention would take place *in His time*. It would seem to God’s people that God was quietly lingering, and moving slowly like a hot day in the summer sun, and like the humidity and dew at harvest time (v4).

But the Lord always has His reasons for what seems to us like delay. In Isaiah 10, God made it clear that first He would use the Assyrians to discipline His people, Israel - but *in His time*, God would fulfill His prophetic promises. The Assyrians would be removed - just as a spent grapevine is cut back and discarded.

In your life as a believer, have you ever felt like God was *“quietly lingering”*? Did you ever feel that His answers to your prayers were delayed? Did you ever think He was too slow in fulfilling His promises, like the slow movement of a long, hot summer day?

Listen! God has His perfect reasons for His timing, and He has His good purposes for what seems to us like a delay.

Let God pick the time!