

Two Woes Pronounced Upon Judah

Isaiah 30-31

Isaiah 30:1-8 - *“Woe to the rebellious children,” says the Lord, “who take counsel, but not of Me, and who devise plans, but not of My Spirit, that they may add sin to sin; ² who walk to go down to Egypt, and have not asked My advice, to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! ³ Therefore the strength of Pharaoh shall be your shame, and trust in the shadow of Egypt shall be your humiliation. ⁴ For his princes were at Zoan, and his ambassadors came to Hanes. ⁵ They were all ashamed of a people who could not benefit them, or be help or benefit, but a shame and also a reproach.”*

⁶ The burden against the beasts of the South. Through a land of trouble and anguish, from which came the lioness and lion, the viper and fiery flying serpent, they will carry their riches on the backs of young donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people who shall not profit; ⁷ for the Egyptians shall help in vain and to no purpose. Therefore I have called her Rahab-Hem-Shebeth.

⁸ Now go, write it before them on a tablet, and note it on a scroll, that it may be for time to come, forever and ever: ⁹ that this is a rebellious people, lying children, children who will not hear the law of the Lord.”

Background Notes

Chapters 28-35 form a section of Isaiah that contained six “woes.” The first woe was pronounced on the northern kingdom of Israel, or Ephraim. The second and third woes were pronounced on the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem. In chapters 30-31 the fourth and fifth woes were also pronounced on Judah and Jerusalem.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord warns His people about worldly alliances.

In verses 1-5, God found fault with His people for turning away from Him and seeking a security alliance with Pharaoh and Egypt (of all places!). In fact, God called this “*sin*” (v1). Zoan and Hanes (v4) were the Egyptian towns where Judah’s ambassadors went to make the alliance. The “*beasts of the south*” (v6) were the ambassadors’ donkeys and camels that carried treasures to Egypt through wild and dangerous territory, in hope of making a military alliance against Assyria. But any alliance would prove to be of no help or benefit, because history tells us that Egypt herself was overrun by the Assyrians.

The nickname that God gave Egypt was *Rahab-Hem-Shebeth* (v7) – *Rahab* meaning “boastful,” and *Hem-Shebeth* meaning “sitting idle.” In other words, arrogant Egypt was an unreliable, do-nothing ally (v8-9).

In these verses the Lord told Isaiah to publicly record the rebellious attitude of the people. Verses 10-11: *“who say to the seers, “Do not see,” and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us right things. Speak to us smooth things; prophesy deceits. ¹¹ Get out of the way. Turn aside from the path. Cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.”* This sounds like the rebellious attitude of many people in our own nation today. They simply don't want to hear the truth. They would rather be told pleasant illusions!

Verses 12-14 warn that Judah's trust in Egypt would be to no avail. It would be like trusting in a high wall that looked strong, but it would suddenly bulge and collapse, breaking into little pieces like a pottery jar. *“And He shall break it like the breaking of the potter's vessel, which is broken in pieces; He shall not spare. So there shall not be found among its fragments a shard to take fire from the hearth, or to take water from the cistern.”* As God's people, Judah should have returned to the Lord and quietly rested in Him, rather than trusting in these fast horses and military strength.

Verses 15-16: *“For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.” But you would not. ¹⁶ And you said, “No, for we will flee on horses”— therefore you shall flee! And, “We will ride on swift horses”— therefore those who pursue you shall be swift!”* As a result of looking to Egypt instead of looking to the Lord, Judah would be left like a signal flag that was left behind at the top of an abandoned hill (v17).

In these verses, the Lord warns His people today about worldly alliances. In the Bible, Egypt is a spiritual picture of “the world.” If we if we leave the Lord out of the picture and make alliances with this world for our security and prosperity, we will be **eternally** disappointed. The Lord warns His people about worldly alliances.

2. The Lord longs to be gracious to His people.

Verses 18-19 predicted that after God had righteously disciplined His people, in grace He would restore His people: *“Therefore the Lord will wait, that He may be gracious to you; and therefore He will be exalted, that He may have mercy on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him. ¹⁹ For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will be very gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when He hears it, He will answer you.”*

Verses 20-21 prophesied that God would reveal Himself to His people, and He would guide them and correct their pathway: *“And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, but your eyes shall see your teachers. ²¹ Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” Whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.”*

Verses 22-25 predicted that *in that day* Israel will abandon all idolatry, and the land will be productive and blessed. When will these prophecies be fulfilled? Have they been fulfilled yet? No, they are yet to be fulfilled in the future, when the Lord

returns and establishes His millennial kingdom on earth. That familiar phrase “*in that day*” (v23 & 26) is a clue. In fact the Tribulation period, which precedes the Lord’s earthly kingdom, is mentioned at the end of verse 25: “*In the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.*” That may refer to the Battle of Armageddon, at the end of the Tribulation period.

Verse 26 may be figurative, but Isaiah 4 predicted that there will be literal changes in the physical conditions of Jerusalem during the Millennium. “*Moreover the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days. In the day that the Lord binds up the bruise of His people and heals the stroke of their wound*” (v26).

In verses 27-33 Isaiah moved from the subject of the millennial blessings back to the Assyrian threat that was facing Judah and Jerusalem. In these verses the Lord promised that He would come to the rescue of His people. He would strike the Assyrians down suddenly, so that the people of Jerusalem would rejoice in the mountain of the Lord. This took place when Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem in 701 BC, and it looked like Jerusalem would surely fall. But God intervened! In one night the Lord struck down 185,000 Assyrian troops. Many of those who were killed were buried in Tophet (v33) – an area south of Jerusalem, in the Hinnom Valley. So in the midst of His discipline, we see God’s grace to His people! The Lord longs to be gracious to His people, then and today.

3. The Lord protects His people when they return to Him.

The fifth woe is found in Isaiah 31. Like the fourth woe, the fifth woe was pronounced upon Judah and Jerusalem for trusting in Egypt for security, rather than trusting in the Lord. But not much hope was to be found in a military alliance with Egypt.

Isaiah 31:1-3 - “*Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many, and in horsemen because they are very strong, but who do not look to the Holy One of Israel nor seek the Lord!*
² *Yet He also is wise and will bring disaster. He will not call back His words, but will arise against the house of evildoers, and against the help of those who work iniquity.* ³ *Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out His hand. Both he who helps will fall, and he who is helped will fall down. They all will perish together.*”

There was “the good news” and “the bad news” for Jerusalem in verses 4-5. First, the bad news: “*For thus the Lord has spoken to me: “As a lion roars, and a young lion over his prey (when a multitude of shepherds is summoned against him, he will not be afraid of their voice nor be disturbed by their noise). So the Lord of hosts will come down to fight for Mount Zion and for its hill”* (v4). The Lord would become like a lion to Judah, tearing her apart like the faceless lambs, because of Judah’s sin. Even the Egyptian shepherds that Judah had hired for protection would not be able to drive the lion away.

But now the good news: “*Like birds flying about, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem. Defending, He will also deliver it; passing over, He will preserve it*” (v5). As a mother bird protects her young, so the Lord of hosts (not Egypt) would protect Jerusalem from Assyria.

In verses 6-9 God promised to protect His people when they returned to Him. “*Return to Him against whom the children of Israel have deeply revolted. 7 For in that day every man shall throw away his idols of silver and his idols of gold—sin, which your own hands have made for yourselves. 8 “Then Assyria shall fall by a sword not of man, and a sword not of mankind shall devour him. But he shall flee from the sword, and his young men shall become forced labor. 9 He shall cross over to his stronghold for fear, and his princes shall be afraid of the banner,” says the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.*”

The prophecy of these last three verses of the chapter have both an historical aspect and an eschatological (future) aspect, just as we’ve seen so often in Isaiah’s prophecy. Historically, God miraculously protected Jerusalem from Sennacherib and the Assyrian forces when good King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem looked to the Lord for help.

And in the future (notice the key phrase “*in that day*” in verse 7), Israel will turn from all forms of idolatry, and will return to the Lord. The Lord will protect them from the future Assyrian king, who is known as “the king of the north” in the prophecies of Daniel 11. The Lord protects His people when they return to Him.

Practical Application

Let’s practice *reliance* - not *alliance*.

These two chapters tell us Judah’s problem: they put their hopes in alliances with foreign nations rather than relying on the Lord—even though the Lord was eager and willing and able to protect them. They practiced *alliance with the world* - not *reliance on the Lord*.

What about us? Do we practice reliance on the Lord - or alliance with the world? 1 John 2:17 says that this world is passing away, so alliance with the world in the present day will prove to be as futile as Israel’s alliance with Egypt in Isaiah’s day.

Are you worried about your future? Are you worried about what will happen to you and who will care for you? Are you relying on your “financial portfolio” for security for the future? Or are you a faithful Christian who is relying on the Lord’s promises for security? Remember, the Lord is willing - and more than able - to do what He has promised!

There’s a wonderful promise in Isaiah 26:3 - “*You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is fixed on You, because he trusts in You.*” Let’s practice **reliance** - **not alliance**!