

ISAIAH: JUDGMENT AND HOPE

17. Isaiah 17-18

The Oracle Concerning Damascus, Ephraim and Cush

ISAIAH 17

¹An oracle concerning Damascus.

Damascus is a reference to Syria. These were the people who stood with the 10 Northern Tribes of Israel against the southern Kingdom of Judah when Ahaz was king.

Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins. ²The cities of Aroer are deserted; they will be for flocks, which will lie down, and none will make them afraid. ³The fortress will disappear from Ephraim

Did you see how the oracle shifted to include the northern Kingdom? **Ephraim** was the dominant tribe among the 10 tribes that made up the northern kingdom — and so the northern kingdom was often referred to as **Ephraim**.

and the kingdom from Damascus; and the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel, declares the Lord of hosts.

This is not a positive thing! Isaiah is saying that the fate of Syria will be like the fate of the northern kingdom — Destruction — The end of glory.

We have the record of the fulfillment of this prophecy in

***2 Kings 15:29** In the days of **Pekah king of Israel**, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria.*

***2 Kings 16:9** The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus and took it, carrying its people captive to Kir, and he killed Rezin.*

⁴And in that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.

God says that the judgment against the Northern Kingdom and Syria will be like a harvest

⁵And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain and his arm harvests the ears, and as when one gleans the ears of grain in the Valley of Rephaim.

⁶Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten— two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, declares the Lord God of Israel.

In Deuteronomy 4 YHWH told His people to be thorough when they harvested their fields and groves — but they were also to leave some for the widows and the poor to glean from (The Book of Ruth gives us a real life picture of this provision for the poor and the widows).

Isaiah says that THAT is what was going to happen when judgment came against the northern kingdom and Syria. There would be a small remnant.

⁷In that day

In the day of YHWH's judgment

man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. ⁸He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense.

The PURPOSE of YHWH in all of this was to the end that they would let go of the *elohiym* they had been worshipping. JUSTICE is certainly God's purposes in judgment. But God says here that while He is accomplishing justice He is also at work to turn our focus away from our idols and the things we have trusted in instead of Him. YHWH says that THAT was going to happen.

By the way — When we repent; when we look to our maker; when we look on the Holy One of Israel; when we stop looking at our idols — we find forgiveness. But

there are consequences of forgiven sin. When the remnant returned, they would return to a land that was laid waste.

Galatians 6:7–8 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

HERE'S THE DEAL — Men and women who profess faith in Jesus will make decisions to do something God says is wrong. They think to themselves: “I know that God will forgive me.” He will. That doesn't mean that their sin comes without a cost. He can forgive adultery — but the trust needed in marriage might be fatally undermined. God can forgive unethical business practice — but you might have done irreparable damage to your ability to be hired in that same profession. A pastor can be forgiven of sexual sin, by the grace of God his marriage might be restored — but his forgiven sin disqualifies him from pastoral ministry.

There is ALWAYS a way forward with the Lord — but there's not always a return backwards!

⁹In that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.

Instead of placing their trust and hope in YHWH they placed their confidence and their hope in their fortified cities.

There is divine irony in Isaiah's reference to their strong cities! When Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan they not only possessed the land God had promised to Abraham — but they also served as God's instrument of judgment on the Canaanites.

Genesis 15:13–16 Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ¹⁴But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you

shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

When Joshua led the descendants of Abraham into the land of Canaan the idol worshipping Canaanites abandoned their strong cities and the Israelites simply moved in. NOW — those same cities would be abandoned by the Israelites! YHWH judged Israel for the same reason He judged the Canaanites — Idolatry and the injustice and unrighteousness that is ALWAYS the result of forsaking YHWH.

¹⁰For you

WHO is the YOU? Is Isaiah speaking to the northern kingdom? Is Isaiah speaking these things to Damascus? No! Isaiah said — *In that day their strong cities*. By way of Isaiah God is saying these things about the northern kingdom to JUDAH because he wants the southern kingdom to learn from the northern kingdom and repent!

¹⁰For you (Judah) have forgotten the God of your salvation and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge;

Living with no thought for YHWH was “business as usual.” God warned their ancestors about this very thing.

Deuteronomy 8:11–14 “Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, ¹²lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,

They simply left YHWH — their saving, merciful God — their rock and their refuge — out of their everyday lives.

therefore, though you plant pleasant plants and sow the vine-branch of a stranger, ¹¹though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and

make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.

8th century Judah was filled with men and women planning for tomorrow when there was not going to be a tomorrow.

What a powerful word for 21st century culture! Like the average man and woman in 8th century BC Jerusalem people are busy creating pleasant things, beautiful things with no thought of the creator of beauty. They go to work every day to **make a future** with no regard for — not thought for — the God who made them and gave His son to redeem them.

***Luke 12:16–21 (The Message)** Then he told them this story: “The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. ¹⁷He talked to himself: ‘What can I do? My barn isn’t big enough for this harvest.’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I’ll gather in all my grain and goods, ¹⁹and I’ll say to myself, Self, you’ve done well! You’ve got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!’ ²⁰“Just then God showed up and said, ‘Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?’ ²¹“That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.”*

QUOTE: Ray Ortlund — *“God is calling us to look away from the little world we have made to the One who made us. God is calling us to stop putting our hope in what we can do and start putting our hope in the divine Doer.”¹*

¹²Ah, the thunder of many peoples; they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations; they roar like the roaring of mighty waters! ¹³The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. ¹⁴At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more! This is the portion of those who loot us, and the lot of those who plunder us.

¹ Raymond C. Ortlund. “Isaiah.”

AGAIN — Isaiah is speaking to the southern kingdom — He’s telling Judah to not worry about Damascus; to not worry about the northern kingdom. They’re going to come like a roaring wave — but God is drawing the line of the tide. God is going to take care Damascus and the northern kingdom by way of Sennacherib and the fierce armies of Assyria.

ISAIAH 18

Just a little heads up as we step into this chapter that’s only seven verses long!

Harry Bultema — *“To us, this brief chapter is the most difficult one of all the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah.”*

Herbert Wolf — *“Although the prophecy is a short one, it probably ranks as the most obscure chapter in this entire section.”*

Adam Clarke — *“This is one of the most obscure prophecies in the whole Book of Isaiah.”*

¹Ah, land of whirring wings that is beyond the rivers of Cush,

Cush included modern-day southern Egypt, Sudan, and northern Ethiopia.² By this time in history Cush had gained control of Egypt.³

²which sends ambassadors by the sea, in vessels of papyrus on the waters!

Ethiopian ambassadors come to make an alliance with Judah and the other nations in the region against Assyria.

Go, you swift messengers, to a nation tall and smooth, to a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide.

² Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 1065). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

³ Kidner, F. D. (1994). Isaiah. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 644). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

It appears that the ambassadors of Cush invite Judah to rebel against the Assyrians — and ask Judah to send swift messengers back to Ethiopia (to a nation tall and smooth ... a nation mighty) hoping to receive word from that Judah would join Cush in rebelling against Assyria.

God says — THAT'S that way you deal with global affairs — Here's how I deal with them!

³All you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look! When a trumpet is blown, hear!

In the realm of geopolitical affairs nations SEE the signals and HEAR the sirens of war. Think military intelligence — think intelligence agents. listening and watching.

⁴For thus the Lord said to me: "I will quietly look from my dwelling like clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."

God is fully aware of what's happening. And knowing everything He's not panicking. There's no DEFCON system in heaven.

We don't want to miss the fact that there is no rebuke or judgment against Ethiopia. YHWH simply says "Thanks, but no thanks — I've got this."

Remember — God is talking to Judah about Cush because He wants Judah to trust in the Him! **What more could we ask for** than our God involved in our world?

HERE'S THE PICTURE — You don't have to participate in the political intrigue in your office, or in your extended family, or in your neighborhood, or in your kid's sports teams — OR in the church or in ministry. God is aware of everything that's happening. What more can YOU ask for than your God — the Creator and Redeemer — involved in YOUR world?

YHWH gave Isaiah this amazing book of prophecies for Isaiah to declare so Judah and Jerusalem would see every part of their lives with prophetic eyes.

YHWH wanted Judah and Jerusalem to see what we sing — that God is

here, moving in our midst....here, working in this place....here, turning lives around.... here, mending every heart.

QUOTE: Ray Ortlund — *“Will you put your trust in God’s sovereignty and justice for you right now in the midst of the battle? Let him stabilize you with comforts this world can never give and can never take away.”*⁴

THAT is what faith looks like

⁵For before the harvest, when the blossom is over, and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks, and the spreading branches he lops off and clears away.

THE PICTURE HERE is that of God’s patience. God is not only fully aware — He is patient. God is never early and never late.

⁶They shall all of them be left to the birds of prey of the mountains and to the beasts of the earth. And the birds of prey will summer on them, and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them.

God is fully aware — God is patient — never early and never late (He is not doing nothing while He waits — he gets so many things accomplished in hearts and lives before He finally acts in the affairs of man). **AND** — God can His work done all by Himself — even when dealing with the most powerful people and seemingly invincible forces.

He will destroy the Assyrian army so completely that **they will be left together for the mountain birds of prey.**

CHECK THIS OUT

Instead of Israelite messengers bringing news to Ethiopia of an alliance against the Assyria — Isaiah says that there would come a day when Ethiopians will come and worship the Lord, and bring gifts to Him at the place of the name of the Lord of hosts — Mount Zion

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund. “Isaiah.”

⁷At that time tribute will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts.

This may have been fulfilled in some way close to Isaiah's time. But we know there was a future fulfilment

Fast forward nearly 700 years to the city of Jerusalem. A high ranking official from the court of Candace, queen of Ethiopia had gone to Jerusalem to worship. He was a eunuch. According to Deuteronomy 6 he couldn't go in to worship because he was a eunuch.

Acts 8:26-39 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰So Philip ran to him and **heard him reading Isaiah the prophet** and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³²Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁸And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

He goes back to the land of Cush worshipping God because of what Jesus did. THAT was not the end of the prophecy. It was also fulfilled in the strong Ethiopian church in the first few centuries of church history, and the enduring Ethiopian church today

YES — there is judgment in these chapters — but SO MUCH MORE!!

These oracles tell us to TRUST in God!

1 John 5:4 For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.

These oracles tell us to TRUST in His Word — TRUST in His plans — TRUST in His power.

These oracles tell us to TRUST IN GOD BECAUSE there is no one else worth trusting; there is no one else worthy of our trust.