

**“God is Mighty to Save”**  
by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Ah, Ariel, Ariel,  
the city where David encamped!  
Add year to year;  
let the feasts run their round.  
<sup>2</sup> Yet I will distress Ariel,  
and there shall be moaning and lamentation,  
and she shall be to me like an Ariel.  
<sup>3</sup> And I will encamp against you all around,  
and will besiege you with towers  
and I will raise siegeworks against you.  
<sup>4</sup> And you will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak,  
and from the dust your speech will be bowed down;  
your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,  
and from the dust your speech shall whisper.  
<sup>5</sup> But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust,  
and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.  
And in an instant, suddenly,  
<sup>6</sup> you will be visited by the LORD of hosts  
with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,  
with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.  
<sup>7</sup> And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,  
all that fight against her and her stronghold and distress her,  
shall be like a dream, a vision of the night.  
<sup>8</sup> As when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he is eating,  
and awakes with his hunger not satisfied,  
or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he is drinking,  
and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched,  
so shall the multitude of all the nations be  
that fight against Mount Zion.  
<sup>9</sup> Astonish yourselves and be astonished;  
blind yourselves and be blind!  
Be drunk, but not with wine;  
stagger, but not with strong drink!  
<sup>10</sup> For the LORD has poured out upon you  
a spirit of deep sleep,  
and has closed your eyes (the prophets),  
and covered your heads (the seers).

<sup>11</sup> And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." <sup>12</sup> And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot read."

<sup>13</sup> And the Lord said:

"Because this people draw near with their mouth  
and honor me with their lips,  
while their hearts are far from me,  
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

<sup>14</sup> therefore, behold, I will again  
do wonderful things with this people,  
with wonder upon wonder;  
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,  
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."

<sup>15</sup> Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,  
whose deeds are in the dark,  
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"

<sup>16</sup> You turn things upside down!  
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,  
that the thing made should say of its maker,  
"He did not make me";  
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,  
"He has no understanding"?

<sup>17</sup> Is it not yet a very little while  
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,  
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

<sup>18</sup> In that day the deaf shall hear  
the words of a book,  
and out of their gloom and darkness  
the eyes of the blind shall see.

<sup>19</sup> The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,  
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

<sup>20</sup> For the ruthless shall come to nothing  
and the scoffer cease,  
and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off,

<sup>21</sup> who by a word make a man out to be an offender,  
and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,  
and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right.

<sup>22</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:

*“Jacob shall no more be ashamed,  
no more shall his face grow pale.  
23 For when he sees his children,  
the work of my hands, in his midst,  
they will sanctify my name;  
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob  
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*

*24 And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,  
and those who murmur will accept instruction.”*

- Isaiah 29, ESV

## **Does Life Ever Feel Impossible for You?**

I've mentioned before that one of all-time favorite books besides the Bible is *Pilgrim's Progress*. One of the best-selling and most widely translated and adapted books of all time, *Pilgrim's Progress* tells the story of the journey of Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Along the way, Christian faces every kind of obstacle, challenge, and opposition imaginable. Some of the problems he faces come from outside of himself, as he is attacked by Satan in the form of the monster Apollyon and tempted by the world at Vanity Fair. At other times, the problems he faces are his own fault, like when he falls asleep in the arbor on the Hill Difficulty or when he leaves the right path because it's too hard and ends up a prisoner in Doubting Castle.

*Pilgrim's Progress* has remained very popular among believers for 345 years because it is a compelling story, and it speaks vividly of the kinds of challenges all Christians face in this life. To live a Christian life as a weak and wayward sinner in a fallen world is a continual challenge. This is not to say that life in Jesus is itself an unending challenge or test or crisis; fundamentally, life is a gift, and we have so much to be thankful for every day of our lives. Still, we do face challenges and tests and crises again and again.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy *“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* (1 Tim 3:12, ESV) Jesus said, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. – John 15:18-20, ESV*

These verses speak to external opposition faced by God's people in this world. If we belong to Jesus Christ, our hearts are His and our loyalty is His. This is something the

world does not understand and cannot control and thus cannot stand. But, if we're honest, we more often face struggle and opposition arising from our own hearts. We grumble and complain because we're gripped by a spirit of entitlement. We are lazy and apathetic. We tend to look for the easy way out or through any situation. We are persistently and ridiculously selfish. We doubt God and His word. We question God's sovereign goodness and refuse to give thanks to Him in all circumstances.

Here in Isaiah 29, Jerusalem is threatened by the mighty Assyrian Empire. It surely looks like the opposition they face is overwhelming and seemingly unopposable. And yet, they're blind to the more serious problems they face. God tells them very quickly that He's going to do away with the mighty nations threatening them. But their own hard-heartedness and spiritual blindness is a much deeper and more profound problem. For us as the Church of Jesus Christ and for us individually as children of God, we can learn much here of the problems we face and the mighty power of God to save us from them.

### **Overwhelming External Threat, vv. 1-4**

So, what is the overwhelming external threat confronting God's people?

*Ah, Ariel, Ariel,*

*the city where David encamped!*

*Add year to year;*

*let the feasts run their round.*

<sup>2</sup> *Yet I will distress Ariel,*

*and there shall be moaning and lamentation,*

*and she shall be to me like an Ariel.*

<sup>3</sup> *And I will encamp against you all around,*

*and will besiege you with towers*

*and I will raise siegeworks against you.*

<sup>4</sup> *And you will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak,*

*and from the dust your speech will be bowed down;*

*your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,*

*and from the dust your speech shall whisper.*

The Lord addresses Jerusalem as Ariel, Ariel. Ariel has a couple of distinct meanings in Hebrew. It can mean "lion of God" or "hero" – as in the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, or it can also mean "altar hearth," a place for burnt offerings. Commentators differ on which meaning is intended here in Isaiah 29, but I think it's an intentional play on words. In other words, Jerusalem thinks of themselves as the Lion of God, as the city of the great hero, David, but they are under threat of being burned as an altar hearth because of their sin.

Notice that while it is the Assyrians who threaten Jerusalem, God says this is His action:

**I will** distress Ariel,  
<sup>3</sup> And **I will** encamp against you all around,  
 and **will** besiege you with towers  
 and **I will** raise siegeworks against you.

Sometimes we try to thread this fine needle of acknowledging God's sovereignty over all things while at the same time safeguarding Him from any accusation of wrongdoing by insisting that He is not the author or agent of evil. And of course, that is correct, in a mysterious way we cannot grasp. However, it seems to me that God in His own word is not about the business of carefully threading theological needles. He says quite bluntly that He is doing this action against His people because, as will be clear later, they have been stubborn and rebellious against Him.

In America, Christians are wondering what's coming for us, as increasing cultural hostility to biblical Christianity and increasing intolerance of our perspective seem to threaten us. But perhaps we need to see these coming fires as discipline and purification from the Lord that we deserve for our worldliness and stubborn unfaithfulness.

### **Sudden & Surprising Deliverance, vv. 5-8**

And then, even though it is the Lord who is bringing the siege against Jerusalem, and even though it is deserved because of her abhorrent sin, the Lord promises swift and surprising deliverance –

<sup>5</sup> *But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust,  
 and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.*  
 And in an instant, suddenly,  
<sup>6</sup> *you will be visited by the LORD of hosts  
 with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,  
 with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.*  
<sup>7</sup> *And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,  
 all that fight against her and her stronghold and distress her,  
 shall be like a dream, a vision of the night.*  
<sup>8</sup> *As when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he is eating,  
 and awakes with his hunger not satisfied,  
 or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he is drinking,  
 and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched,  
 so shall the multitude of all the nations be  
 that fight against Mount Zion.*

The Lord refers to “*the multitude of all the nations that fight against Mount Zion,*” because the Assyrians were a large empire made up of many nations. By this time, they had swallowed up and included Syria and Israel. Also, the Edomites and the Philistines couldn’t wait for Judah to be destroyed.

And yet, the Lord promises that all of these many foes will be like small dust and passing chaff. This large multitude will be like a dream. Verse 8 has a very funny analogy. These forces are so overwhelmingly superior to Jerusalem that they can almost taste the spoil already. They are already counting the gold and dividing it among themselves in their minds. And yet, the Lord says it’ll be like someone who eats a huge Thanksgiving meal in his dreams only to wake up and find he’s still quite hungry. God is able to save, and He will deliver His people.

We never need to fear outside pressure or threats. God knows well how to protect and deliver His own. He is our strong Savior.

### **Overwhelming Internal Problems, vv. 9-16**

The people of Jerusalem were so concerned about the external threats of the many nations that surrounded them that they were blind to much more serious internal problems. They saw the external manifestation of the Lord’s displeasure with them while being blind to its causes in their own hearts and lives.

<sup>9</sup> *Astonish yourselves and be astonished;  
blind yourselves and be blind!*

*Be drunk, but not with wine;  
stagger, but not with strong drink!*

<sup>10</sup> *For the LORD has poured out upon you  
a spirit of deep sleep,  
and has closed your eyes (the prophets),  
and covered your heads (the seers).*

<sup>11</sup> *And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot, for it is sealed.”* <sup>12</sup> *And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot read.”*

<sup>13</sup> *And the Lord said:*

*“Because this people draw near with their mouth  
and honor me with their lips,  
while their hearts are far from me,  
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,*

*<sup>14</sup> therefore, behold, I will again  
do wonderful things with this people,  
with wonder upon wonder;  
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,  
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”*

*<sup>15</sup> Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,  
whose deeds are in the dark,  
and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”*

*<sup>16</sup> You turn things upside down!  
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,  
that the thing made should say of its maker,  
“He did not make me”;  
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,  
“He has no understanding”?*

These verses present us with a host of problems with God’s people:

1. They are spiritual drunkards under God’s judgment. (v. 9)
2. Their prophets and seers are blind, and the whole people are spiritually asleep as a judgment from God. (v. 10)
3. They are unable and uninterested in understanding the vision of the Lord (vv. 11-12)
4. These spiritual judgments have been poured out on them by the Lord because they are religious formalists. They merely go through the motions in their worship and do not actually fear the Lord and worship from the heart. (v. 13)
5. They think they can hide their secret sins from the Lord and He will not see them (v. 15)
6. They think they can turn things upside down and put themselves in the position of judging and questioning God. (v. 16)

These verses describing these problems should get our attention because we are so often guilty of the same things. We go through the motions in our worship, showing up and being half-hearted and half-engaged. We hide our sin in secret and think we’re getting away with it. And our culture has become fixated on judging and questioning God, even as we claim not to believe in Him. Churches are ever-increasingly busy defending God and even apologizing for Christian beliefs instead of boldly and clearly proclaiming His word. Biblical ignorance is at all-time highs. People don’t read, study, understand, and seek to apply God’s Word to their lives. It’s a sad state of affairs.

What about your life? How much of this is descriptive of you?

## Powerful Overcoming Redemption, vv. 17-24

The good news is that just as surely as God is able to deliver His people from external threats, He is also able to save us from ourselves:

- <sup>17</sup> Is it not yet a very little while  
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,  
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?*
- <sup>18</sup> In that day the deaf shall hear  
the words of a book,  
and out of their gloom and darkness  
the eyes of the blind shall see.*
- <sup>19</sup> The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,  
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.*
- <sup>20</sup> For the ruthless shall come to nothing  
and the scoffer cease,  
and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off,  
<sup>21</sup> who by a word make a man out to be an offender,  
and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,  
and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right.*
- <sup>22</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:  
“Jacob shall no more be ashamed,  
no more shall his face grow pale.  
<sup>23</sup> For when he sees his children,  
the work of my hands, in his midst,  
they will sanctify my name;  
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob  
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.  
<sup>24</sup> And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,  
and those who murmur will accept instruction.”*

God will often say that something is going to happen “in a little while” or “very soon” when, from our human perspective, it takes a long time. In the case of this passage, these words are not fulfilled for over 750 years. The imagery of Lebanon being turned into a fruitful field and a fruitful field into a forest is a prophecy that God is going to transform the moral and spiritual order of the world. Lebanon was a forested area, but it would become a fruitful farm field, while fruitful farm fields would be turned into forests.



At this time in human history, the people of Judah and Jerusalem were the only fruitful field of the Lord in the world, as they were pretty pathetic and weed-infested. Yet, when Jesus comes, He brings the kingdom of God to earth with such power and scope that the Gospel would spread from India to Ethiopia to Spain within 35 years of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And yet, at the same time, Judah and Jerusalem would sink even further into spiritual darkness like a fruitful field being overrun by a dense forest.

Earlier, in verses 11-12, we read of how uninterested or unable the people of Jerusalem and Judah were when it came to reading and understanding the Word of the Lord. But now, we see the opposite –

*In that day the deaf shall hear  
the words of a book,  
and out of their gloom and darkness  
the eyes of the blind shall see.*

On our own, we are spiritually dead, blind, deaf, and dumb. We cannot see, hear, understand, or respond to the Word of God, nor do we care to do so. We're like vegans at a Brazilian Steakhouse – all the richness is wasted on us. But praise God, He is able and willing to bring us from death to life, to open our eyes so we can see, to unstop our ears so we can hear, to loosen our tongues so we can sing and proclaim His praises.

Even those of us who have known the Lord our whole lives and who have a tendency to go astray and wander from God's will have hope in the sovereign saving power of God, as verse 24 proclaims –

*And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,  
and those who murmur will accept instruction.*

God can and will still our wayward feet and grant us faithfulness by His grace. He can quiet our murmuring hearts and make us teachable in spirit.

## **Nothing is Impossible for Almighty God!**

No matter what obstacles we are facing, we need to remember and believe that nothing is impossible for the LORD Almighty, our Father and our God. Are we concerned about changing cultural realities seeking to silence Christian voices? Are we concerned about the persecution of believers around the world? The LORD Almighty, our God and Father, is mighty to save and nothing is impossible for Him.

What should concern us even more is the formalism, the apathy, the willful ignorance, and the murmuring of our own hearts, the worldly faithlessness of the church that desires prestige, position, power, and popularity over holiness and faithfulness to the Lord. What should concern us more is our own cold, indifferent, half-hearted approach to worship and discipleship, to evangelism and missions. We need our hearts and lives revived by the Lord!

Praise God, the LORD Almighty is Mighty to Save even us! He can and will revive our hearts and lives and homes and our church by His grace and for His glory. Let's seek it from Him alone and believe Him for it!