

Isaiah 17 The Roar of Nations versus The Rebuke of God

Let us ask for eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to know our God.

God of all truth, we thank you for making known to us Your law, encouraging us by Your testimonies, and showing us Your ways. You have commanded Your precepts to be kept diligently. And You have commanded blessing on those who walk in Your paths. Oh that our ways may be steadfast in keeping Your statutes. Then we shall not be put to shame, having our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. Gracious Holy Spirit, enlighten our minds in the knowledge of Christ as You open the Word to us, that we, under Your almighty influence, may praise You with an upright heart, as we learn Your righteous decrees. By Your presence and illumination we will know the faithfulness of our Lord who said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” We lay our request before You through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever been driving around a big city with highways going every which way only to suddenly realize that you have to decide in a matter of seconds which lane you need to be in, and that the choice you make will either keep you en route to your destination or cause you to drive around for another hour before you are back on track? While you are considering your choice you also have to attend to other motorists, and no one seems too friendly as they jockey for position on the speedway—I mean, highway. It can be unnerving. Have you ever had to make important choices for your career or for your family without much time to consider before the choice passes you by? Have you ever had to make a moral choice in the heat of the moment in which the immoral action looks like the safest route to take, while the God-honoring choice looks precarious, fraught with difficulties? In Isaiah’s day, the Kingdom of Judah was constantly faced with such moments of decision. They were the vassal kingdom of the Lord God of hosts. They had Him to thank for their prosperity and security. They owed Him

their loyalty and love. But often an enemy appeared on the scene threatening to destroy them; when from another quarter a “savior” offered to rescue them, but only on terms that were unacceptable to the Lord God, terms that violated their covenant with the Lord. At such times, God would immediately send His Word through a prophet to remind Judah of their relationship with God. They would rehearse His saving actions in their past history. They would recite the laws that God had decreed that they live by. The prophets would bring the assurances of God’s promise if they would entrust their cause to Him and follow His counsel. On the one hand, is the offer of deliverance from a tangible, visible resource that can be sized up by numbers, weight, wealth, and war machines; while on the other hand, is the Word of the Lord. On the one hand, is the roar of the nations in battle tumult; on the other hand, is the Voice of the Lord. Now, their covenant document with the Lord, the Bible, would remind them that by the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and their starry host by the breath of His mouth (Psalm 33:6). They were taught by the great King David to sing, “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. . . . The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness” (Psalm 29). But in that instant, that moment of decision, they do not hear the majestic voice, they do not see stars breathed into distant galaxies, they do not feel the heat of flashes of flames of fire, or the quaking of the earth under their feet. Instead, they see a lone man, a prophet, and hear a lonely voice that is mocked by the experts, the sociologists, psychologists, political pundits, and academy of the day, who join with the roar of the nations, “Follow in this new path. Our fathers did not face the enemies that we face today. We must have a new strategy to meet these new challenges. Our fathers did not know then the things we have discovered now. We must have new ways for new days.” There is no time for lengthy deliberation. Will we listen to the call of

the world or obey the call of the Lord? What Judah is told here in Isaiah 17 is that the one choice is an idol that will topple over, shatter to pieces, leaving the worshipers to fend for themselves, while the other is the God of your salvation and the Rock of your refuge (v. 10). Through Isaiah God is still speaking to His Church: You can escape the deception of idolatry and find true life only by trusting in God with persevering hope. Hear the rebuke of God over the roaring of the nations. Let's take a look at the deception of idolatry, the devastating disappointment of idolatry, and the deliverance from idolatry through the judgment of God our Savior.

First, let's consider that **idolatry deceives by delivering superficial instant gratification**. Isaiah entitled this section "An oracle concerning Damascus." The message is specifically concerned with Damascus' coalition with Ephraim, also known as the northern kingdom of Israel, the northern half of the people of God. It's instructive that the Lord's message quickly moves from the downfall of Damascus in verses 1-3 to take aim at the other party in this coalition, Israel or Ephraim. God is more concerned to show Judah, who is the southern half of the people of God, the consequences of Israel's idolatry, no doubt because Israel, like Judah, should have known better because of their covenant relationship with the LORD.

The problem of **idolatry** is at the very center of this oracle, in verse 8, where we read of "the altars, work of his hands . . . what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense." Ever since the northern tribes of Israel rebelled against the tribe of Judah and the dynasty of King David, idolatry was the distinction of their national life. To prevent his subjects from defecting to the kingdom of Judah when they would go up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship, Jeroboam, northern Israel's first king, established two alternative worship locales, each outfitted with Israel's favorite fetish, golden calves, in direct violation of God's commands to have no other gods before Him and to make no carved image with which to worship. This calf-cult of

Jeroboam opened the floodgate to the worship of the Phoenician deities Baal and Asherah, who is mentioned in the plural in this verse. The proliferation of Baal worship was zealously carried out under the reign of the infamous king Ahab by his wicked wife, Jezebel. What was so appealing about these cults was that they could be manipulated by the worshipers, in order to suit them. Notice that the description of these idols focuses on their human manufacture. They are the "work of his hands" and "what his own fingers have made." These idols and the rituals involved in their worship represented the imaginations and aspirations of sinful humanity. The Baal cult was a fertility cult that involved cult-prostitutes and magical rites. Barry Webb comments, "The worship of the Canaanites consisted largely of the performance of rites which were thought to induce fertility in flock and field by a kind of sympathetic magic. One such rite appears to underlie verses 10-11 with their mention of *finest plants* and *imported vines* ('slips of an alien god, RSV). Slips were induced to grow and blossom at an artificially rapid rate, probably at a shrine. But of course the evidence which they appeared to give of the potency of the god was false, and participation in such rites by Israelites showed that they had turned their backs on the LORD, the only one who could have given them security (10a)."¹ Why are we so prone to place our confidence in our wisdom, ingenuity, and strength? Do we really believe that we are our own best security? This is the height of pride and vanity. Yet it is the sin common to all mankind.

One of the great spells of idolatry is its **superficial instant gratification**. In verse 4 we read of "the glory of Jacob" and "the fat of his flesh." He seemed to be prospering under these false gods. So we read in verse 9 of "strong cities" and in verse 11 of plants that grow up in one day and blossom in the same morning that you sow the seed!! False gods offer instant gratification, keeping people just "happy" enough to keep them

¹ Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England: IVP, 1996), 91.

from turning to God. The god of greed would gratify your desires by stealing rather than working. Greed would have you lying on your tax forms, as you complain about the injustice of high taxes. The god of pleasure would have you satisfy your desire through lustful gazes and extra-marital affairs. The god of pleasure would have you calling in sick, when you are just lazy and slothful, or desiring to do something other than work. The god of pride would have you cheating on your exams so that you don't look bad in comparison to your peers. Pride would have you become a moral chameleon, changing colors based on your surroundings, rather than taking a painful stand for what is right and true. Instant money, instant sex, instant popularity. The gods of this world offer all this and more, if you will just give them your heart. This can be a great temptation, because the living and true God quite often says "I will satisfy you with good things," but you must wait patiently on the Lord. God calls us to hope. Yes, life in Christ is abundant life. Yet, out of that overflowing life in the Spirit, comes the call in this world to deferred gratification for many desires. There is a way to honor God with your money. It may require a lot of sweaty hard work. It may demand that you not buy everything you want on credit. You may have to learn to say "no" to yourself. There is a way to honor God with your sexuality. The marriage bed is honorable, but outside of this we run aground on the shoals of selfishness and exploitation of another. This is where we must beware of the allure of idolatry that says, "You don't need to wait. You can have it all now. You can have your heart's desire." And it seems to deliver, at least initially.

For Damascus and Ephraim this seeming success granted by the gods bred in their hearts the over-confidence that we hear mocked in verses 12-13: "Ah, 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! The nations roar like the roaring of many waters!" But it all rings hollow. Israel's idolatry came to fruition in its rejection of God's protection and their attempt to find shelter under the alliance

with Damascus. The emptiness of their idolatry was that "you have forgotten the God of your salvation and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge" (v. 10). Now, they did not forget in the sense that they no longer told the stories of the Lord, or no longer mentioned His name. In fact, all the evidence points in the opposite direction. They thought they could combine the worship of these false gods with the worship of the true God. They tried to blend the religion of Canaan with the worship of the Lord—what we call syncretism. They continued to regard themselves as the people of the Lord, the heirs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But they had forgotten God in the sense that they no longer knew Him as He had revealed Himself, but only as they had refashioned Him in their own imaginations. Therefore, they did not walk in His ways, but they walked in their own ways, doing what was right in their own eyes, all the while telling themselves, "My god wouldn't have it any other way." And they were right, because they had forgotten the true God, and were now leaning on their own understanding. This takes us to the second point of this message. We have first considered that idolatry deceives by delivering superficial instant gratification.

Second, let's consider that **idolatry results in sudden and devastating disappointment**. Let us hear again these words of **sudden and devastating disappointment**: "Behold, Damascus will *cease* to be a city and will become a heap of *ruins*. The cities of Aroer are *deserted*. . . . The fortress will *disappear* from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus." (vv.1- 3). In verse 4 we find that the gratification from the false gods was short-lived: Jacob's glory is brought low, his once robust life has grown lean. What is left in the wake of the false god's? We read of "gleanings" (v. 6); "deserted places and desolation" (v.9). Despite their devotion to the gods of fertility they find that "the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain" (v. 11). The once proud and boastful nations "will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm" (v. 13).

Gripped by “terror” in the night, by morning “they are no more” (v. 14). Old Testament commentator John Oswalt warns, “No matter how successful one’s techniques for forcing the best out of one’s life, the harvest will be a bitter disappointment if those techniques avoid dependence upon God.”² I would add, even when those techniques are couched in religious language and ritual.

The teenage athlete, who tries to outperform his peers by abusing steroids, eventually finds that what initially gave him more drive, bulging muscles, and enhanced strength, has cost him precious relationships due to mood alterations, and has left him stripped of his natural masculinity as his body became dependent on the roids and stopped producing appropriate levels of testosterone. That is a picture of the trap of idolatry. Isn’t that our common experience of sin? It promises a shortcut to pleasure or popularity or success, but once we’ve bought in to “the deal of a lifetime” we discover it is a lemon. “Go ahead, eat that forbidden fruit. It won’t hurt you. You won’t die. In fact, with just one bite you will be like God. You will see things you’ve never seen before.” Indeed they did see. They saw that they were naked, yet strangely clothed with shame.

The oracle against Damascus and Ephraim is also a warning to Judah. Don’t fall for the empty promises and superficial “benefits” of rejecting God’s way for any other way. It will end very badly. Paul sounds the same warning in our ears in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14: *“For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.*

² John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 354.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” So we have seen that idolatry deceives by delivering superficial instant gratification, but that idolatry results in sudden and devastating disappointment.

Finally, let’s consider that **God’s judgment on idolatry brings us before Him as our only salvation**. Isaiah again brings the future, final judgment at the climax of history to bear on the contemporary circumstances of the rise and fall of nations with the words “in that day,” repeated three times in this text, most pointedly in verse 7: “In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel.” In that day when idolatrous man is stripped of all his confidence in himself and his false gods he will come face to face with his Maker, the Holy One of Israel. In that day when man is brought to the end of himself and discovers his emptiness he will have nowhere to look but to his Maker, the Holy One. The generic term “man” is consistent with Isaiah’s broader concern for humanity, who is embodied in Israel. This message, focused as it is on the particular circumstances of Ephraim and Damascus, illustrates a more general truth of God’s turning people from idolatry to acknowledge the Holy One of Israel as his Maker, the only living and true God.

The hope for idolaters is that in the judgment of God against their false hopes they will come to look on their Maker and remember the God of their salvation (v. 10). Salvation is a comprehensive term that refers to our deliverance from alienation from God, our safety and security in Him, and the well-ordered peace of His rule. What the false gods offer as cheap counterfeits, knockoffs of true pleasure, true wealth, true life, the God of your salvation can give in truth. The LORD is the Rock of our refuge. The only safety from the judgment of God is in the Judge Himself. Paul said that the Rock that followed Israel in the wilderness and from which they drank in the desert was Christ. He is our Rock. Jesus said that when we hear His words and do them, we enjoy the security of His refuge. But when one rejects Jesus and builds on his own wisdom, making his own priorities, and choosing what is right in his own eyes, then life ends in disaster. The idols of our hearts are a false hope. Jesus is the Rock of our refuge.

So how does Christ deliver us from sin and temptation? How can we be free of the idols of our generation? How can we be free from the idols of our own hearts? Proverbs 27:7 says “One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet.” As long as you try to fill yourself with the vain things fashioned by your imagination and ingenuity or by the world’s wisdom you will be empty; and your hungry soul will continue to consume the bitter things of this life, convinced that they are sweetness itself. But Christ said that He is the Bread of Life, the True Manna, and that whoever would come to Him shall not hunger (John 6:35). When we are full of Christ we have the wherewithal to resist even the sweetest delicacies that the world has to offer, because we have tasted and known that He is good. No substitute will do. This does not mean that as Christians we are never attracted to the cheap perfume of the world. But it does mean that in Christ we are surrounded by the scent of heaven, which awakens the conscience and beckons us to enjoy Christ. It is not that we don’t hear the roar of the nations, intimidating us to their godless alliance. But as

we abide in Christ, and His Word abides in us, His rebuke hushes the nations’ roar. Increase your hunger for Christ by feasting on His Word. Read and study the Word to gain understanding of Christ. Meditate upon His Word. Repeat it to yourself throughout your day. Pray the Word back to Christ. When you hear the false gods calling you away from Christ, turn your ear, your eyes, your heart away from the world and turn toward Christ. Do not look to the altars of the false gods. Idolatry deceives by delivering superficial instant gratification; but in the end it results in devastating disappointment. Look to your Maker. Look on the Holy One.

Let us pray.

O God of our salvation, our Rock of refuge, You have graciously fed us upon Your truth; and we thank You. Deliver us from the schemes of the devil, the deceitfulness of our own hearts, and the enticements of the world. Turn our eyes, we pray, to look on Christ with awe and adoration, that we may live for Your glory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we hear Isaiah’s charge against Israel that they had *forgotten* the God of their salvation and had not *remembered* the Rock of their refuge, we hear even more clearly the words of our Lord Jesus who broke the bread of the Passover and said, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in *remembrance* of Me.” We are called to remember, not with mere lip service, but with true faith and loving obedience. This is a remembrance that implies, not merely historical knowledge, but a living relationship. As we approach the Lord’s Table together to partake in this covenantal meal, this sealing ordinance of our bond with God through the blood of Christ, we are reminded that this Table is open to you who, having discerned the body of the Lord, have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, and Him crucified; you have confessed with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believed in your heart that God raised Him from the dead; and you look for His appearing,

“when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:10). If you have not trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, then we urge you not to partake of this communion, warning you with this warning from the Apostle of Jesus Christ, “Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:29). For this reason we also ask that children who have not been received at the Lord’s Table by the Elders of the church also refrain. Because of the reality of the Spiritual presence of Christ at His table, you are encouraged to examine yourself, and then partake of the table and cup of the Lord. But you are not to examine yourself to see whether you are perfect. You are not to excommunicate yourself from the Lord’s Table because you have not arrived. Rather, you are to examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith. Are you trusting in Jesus Christ? Are you resting in His finished work at the cross? Is there love in your heart for the One who loved you and gave Himself up for you? For, truly, without love nothing can profit you. Let us take a moment to prepare our hearts as the Elders come to serve you.