

ISAIAH 17

AGAINST SYRIA AND ITS ALLIES

At first glance, the prophecy which comprises the first eleven verses of this chapter seems to be against Syria alone (the capital of which was Damascus). But it also relates to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and its capital of Samaria. This is because the kingdoms of Israel and Syria were confederated against the Southern Kingdom of Judah, as we learned in chapter 7. The purpose of the prophecy may have been to warn Israel of the approaching destruction of Damascus, so that they would be discouraged from forming an alliance with them against Judah. But surely the Lord also intended these words to give consolation to the Kingdom of Judah, by the assurance that the alliance between Syria and Israel was not to be dreaded, but that the Kingdom of Judah would be safe. No alliance formed against them would be successful, and there was no reason to dread any other nation's plans to destroy them.

This prophecy was fulfilled during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah (743-727 BC), when Damascus was taken captive by King Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria, and its people were carried to Kir (2 Kings 16:9); and also when he overran a great part of the Kingdom of Israel, and carried away its inhabitants to Assyria. As we study the Bible, it is most instructive and interesting to observe how the Lord raises up one nation and puts down another, according to how those nations were made instrumental to either humble or raise Israel's glory. In the meantime, the Lord preserves His Church as His own handful of people in the midst of the earth. Rise or fall who may among the nations, yet the Lord's portion continues the same! (Mic. 5:5-9)

Since the Northern Kingdom of Israel joined themselves with Syria in their plots against Judah, they would also share in Syria's judgment. The harvestman that is mentioned in verse 5 signifies King Shalmaneser of Assyria. As described in 2 Kings 17, he carried away the Northern Kingdom, just like a reaper carries away the corn from a field. Yet once again, even in the midst of these threatenings of judgment, promises of grace are here given for the faithful people of God. It is said in verse 6 that a small remnant of the Israelites would be left, like a few berries left on the uppermost branches of an olive tree after the fruit is gathered. This remnant would be turned away from their idols by the judgments which they witnessed (verses 7-8), and they would have respect to the Holy One of Israel. Even in the darkest periods of corruption and of judgment, God keeps a remnant for Himself.

Verses 9-11 contain a very solemn warning, which every one of us will do well to heed. The warning is that every labor which we carry on in forgetfulness

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ A prophecy of the fall of the strong cities of Syria and Israel – verses 1-5, 9-11
- ❖ In the midst of judgment, mercy is remembered for God's people – verses 6-8
- ❖ The overthrow of the Assyrian army before Jerusalem is foretold – verses 12-14

of God is sure to be labor lost. We may sow precious seed; and for a while, it may show very promising signs of flourishing – but it is sure to wither, and we are certain to reap nothing except disappointment and grief. Parents may take the utmost pains in raising their children; but if they attempt to do so apart from Christ, they must not hope for His blessing upon their little ones. Men may be toiling at their business and profession; but if they are forgetting God, they will sooner or later discover that they have spent their strength for nothing. Let us all ask ourselves this question: “Is there any activity which I am carrying on, and is there any pursuit in which I am engaged, upon which I am not in the habit of asking God’s blessing; and in reference to which, the Lord is forgotten?” All of us, during our whole lives, are trying to do something or another – sowing some kind of seed, and planting some kind of plant. And we are often inclined to complain that we have been disappointed, that many of our most promising plants have withered, and that some of the seed which we sowed most carefully has never sprung up. But perhaps, by a little reflection, we might trace our disappointments back to their right cause: namely, forgetfulness of God, and the omission of distinct and earnest prayer for His blessing! Let us resolve from henceforward to not sow one seed or plant one plant without seeking the Lord in the gracious character in which He here reveals Himself – that is, as the God of our Salvation, and the Rock of our Strength! There is nothing for our souls to rest upon or find joy in except for Jesus; and if we do not make Him our chief happiness, it does not matter what else we try to find pleasure in – for all will deceive us, and prove to be nothing but a delusion. Precious Lord! How wondrously does every part of Your blessed Word manifest the infinite importance of Yourself and Your great salvation!

It seems that verses 12-14 contain a new prophecy which has no connection with that which precedes it in verses 1-11. And in itself, it gives no certain indication of the time when it was uttered, or of the people concerning whom it speaks. Nevertheless, it is a beautiful portion. It evidently describes some great army rushing to conquest, in confidence of sure and certain success; but they were overtaken with sudden calamity and distress. The general theme of these verses is that numerous hostile nations would overrun Palestine, but Jehovah would destroy them all! This is a general declaration in regard to the enemies of the Jewish people, but such is the end and final destiny of all who attempt to destroy God’s people. His children shall be safe, no matter who may rise up against them! However great the numbers or the power of their foes may be, they shall all be overthrown with a final and total destruction!

Lord, we praise You for always preserving a faithful remnant of Your people, Who remain true to You even in the most corrupt and evil of times, and refuse to bow the knee to idols! Amen.

