

Pentwater Bible Church

Isaiah Message 36

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Tourists walk in the historical city of Palmyra Thomson Reuters

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Pentwater Bible Church

The Book of Isaiah

Message Thirty-Six

THE JUDGMENT OF DAMASCUS

September 15, 2019

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Isaiah 17:1–8

¹The burden of Damascus. Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap. ²The cities of Aroer are forsaken; they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid. ³And the fortress shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria; they shall be as the glory of the children of Israel, saith Jehovah of hosts.

⁴And it shall come to pass in that day, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean. ⁵And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the standing grain, and his arm reapeth the ears; yea, it shall be as when one gleaneth ears in the valley of Rephaim. ⁶Yet there shall be left therein gleanings, as the shaking of an olive-tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost branches of a fruitful tree, saith Jehovah, the God of Israel. ⁷In that day shall men look unto their Maker, and their eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. ⁸And they shall not look to the altars, the work of their hands; neither shall they have respect to that which their fingers have made, either the Asherim, or the sun-images (ASV, 1901).

THE BURDEN OF DAMASCUS

ISAIAH 17:1–3

¹The burden of Damascus. Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap. ²The cities of Aroer are forsaken; they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid. ³And the fortress shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria; they shall be as the glory of the children of Israel, saith Jehovah of hosts (ASV, 1901).

This prophecy of Damascus, Syria is titled a burden or in the Hebrew a “*massa*.” This is a heavy, heavy set of declarations on this city given approximately in 735 B.C. A Jewish Targum (paraphrase commentary) calls it, “the burden of the cup of cursing to give Damascus to drink.” At the time Isaiah wrote this oracle against Damascus the Northern ten tribes of Israel had allied with Syria called Aram in the Bible. Aroer was a large and important area in Syria. Because Assyria had threatened the Southern Kingdom of Judah God spoke through Isaiah the prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah assuring them that Damascus would become a ruinous heap (Hebrew *Mapala*) and not a threat.

The conquering and despoiling was done in 732 B.C. by Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, as explained in II Kings 16:9. It had been a very ancient city and now was in ruins. Damascus would be rebuilt and then destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian King described in Jeremiah 49:21. Therefore, this prophecy given to Isaiah was fulfilled in the two invasions of Damascus by Assyria and Babylon both of which destroyed the city and left it in ruins.

It is important to see how the Northern kingdom of Israel, referenced as Ephraim, the largest tribal area in the North, aligned itself with Damascus.

From Isaiah 7:1–2. We see that Rezin, king of Aram (Ancient name of Syria), northeast of Israel, and Pekah king of Israel (752–732B.C.) had made an alliance. Rezin may have usurped the throne of Aram, and Pekah was a usurper. Rezin was Aram’s last king, and Pekah was Israel’s next-to-last king. After Jeroboam II (793–753) of Israel died, the Northern Kingdom became increasingly weak. Rezin convinced Pekah to join him in a war against the Southern Kingdom of Judah (II Kings 15:37; 16:5). They threatened to replace Judah’s King Ahaz with a puppet king (Isaiah 7:6). The prospect of such formidable enemies as Aram and Israel caused the people of Judah to be afraid.

The Bible characterizes Ahaz as an evil man who participated in the most monstrous of idolatrous practices (II Kings 16:3). Ahaz ignored any trust in the Lord for his circumstances and tried to get military help from Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria. This alliance produced religious and political outcomes that Ahaz did not expect. Ahaz surrendered to Assyrian domination.

Hearing of the Aram- Israel alliance Ahaz was terrified. Ephraim, Israel’s largest tribe, represented in a synecdoche the entire northern nation as is also the case in the Book of Hosea (Hosea 4:17; 5:3, 5, 9–14). This was in the year 734 B.C. Ahaz foolishly thought he could call on the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727) to come to his aid and attack the Aram-Israel confederacy. What happened though was the king of Assyria took Damascus and exiled its inhabitants (II Kings 16:9). Then in 722 B.C. He conquered the Northern Kingdom and took them back to Assyria and populated the Northern Kingdom with people from many different areas.

II Kings 17:24

²⁴And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Avva, and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof (ASV, 1901).

The inbreeding of these people with the remaining people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel produced the Samaritans which were hated by the Jewish people.

These are some references to what happened to Damascus primarily for Israel (northern 10 tribes) aligning itself with pagan Damascus.

1. Damascus has become helpless (Jeremiah 49:24).
2. The king of Assyria took Damascus and exiled its inhabitants (2 Kings 16:9).

3. Ahaz copied the altar in Damascus (2 Kings 16:10).
4. Ahaz sacrificed to the gods of Damascus (2 Chronicles 28:23).
5. I will set fire to the wall of Damascus (Jeremiah 49:27).
6. The spoil of Damascus and Samaria will be carried away to Assyria (Isaiah 8:4).
7. Is not Samaria like Damascus? (Isaiah 10:9).
8. The kingdom will disappear from Damascus (Isaiah 17:3).
9. I will break the [gate] bar of Damascus (Amos 1:5).
10. For three transgressions of Damascus and for four (Amos 1:3).
11. The oracle of the word of the Lord will rest on Damascus (Zechariah 9:1)

The Arab states and Damascus will all receive a final judgment at the start of the Messianic Kingdom. It is difficult to predict if there will be another invasion of Damascus before the final destination which is a result of their perpetual hatred of Israel as characterized as early as Numbers 20:14-21 and in summary form in Psalm 83:1-8.

Some believe that the civil war which started in 2011 in Syria is a fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 17:1, but there is no biblical indication that this is accurate. It is outside sound hermeneutics to look to the news first in order to justify a prophecy in the Bible. We look to the Bible to see what God has said will happen then look to world events to see if they match up exactly as prophesied. Damascus presently is not in ruin as when the Assyrians and Babylonians destroyed the city. Some might view this prophecy in Isaiah 17:1 as indicative of a type of prophetic fulfillment called the “double reference.” Hermeneutically those instances refer to a near and far term view of a prophesied event such as in Deuteronomy 18 where Moses predicts a prophet who would succeed him. Although Joshua fulfilled the near-term fulfillment, Acts 3:22-23 applies it to Jesus, hence, the near and far view fulfillment. If there is a future destruction of Damascus equally ruinous as the Assyrian and Babylonian destructions were prior to the Tribulation, so far it has not happened. There is still no biblical reference to a far term reference to this despoiling of Damascus in our time as the Acts 3:22-23 passage refers to the far term fulfillment of Jesus as the object of Moses' prediction of a prophet to succeed him. Many see the text of Psalm 83:1-8 as the fulfillment of the far term prophecy of Isaiah 17:1 but that is simply an imprecatory Psalm, not a prophecy of an event that will come to pass. Therefore, there is no clear indication in the Bible that this will have a far term fulfillment.

ISRAEL WILL SUFFER

Isaiah 17:4–5

⁴And it shall come to pass in that day, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean. ⁵And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the standing grain, and his arm reapeth the ears; yea, it shall be as when one gleaneth ears in the valley of Rephaim (ASV, 1901).

Ephraim and Israel, the ten tribes, who had power due to the superior number of their tribes to Judah; in the number of their cities and the citizens of them; but now would be thinned, by the large numbers of them who would be carried away captive as prisoners of war. *And*

the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean; so just like a man in suffering from dysentery, who becomes a mere skeleton, and is reduced to skin and bones, the meaning is, that all their wealth and riches will be taken away. So the Targum paraphrase says, “and the riches of his glory shall be carried away.”

“*Yea, it shall be as when one gleaneth ears in the valley of Rephaim,*” The valley of Rephaim was close in proximity to Jerusalem and was known as an infertile area that did not produce many crops. Gleanings were the few leftovers after the reapers went through the valley harvesting the crops. The reapers left some there for the poor to have. This was ancient welfare. What God is saying here through Isaiah is the few people who manage to escape the Assyrian army most will still be captured like one who plucks the few standing stalks of grain in the valley of Rephaim one by one.

Isaiah 17:6–8

⁶Yet there shall be left therein gleanings, as the shaking of an olive-tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost branches of a fruitful tree, saith Jehovah, the God of Israel. ⁷In that day shall men look unto their Maker, and their eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. ⁸And they shall not look to the altars, the work of their hands; neither shall they have respect to that which their fingers have made, either the Asherim, or the sun-images (ASV, 1901).

“*Yet there shall be left therein gleanings,*” which is a simile referencing the ten northern tribes, a few of them should escape, a remnant should be saved; comparable, for the smallness of their number, to grapes that are gleaned after the harvest. The same thing is signified by another simile, *as the shaking of an olive-tree*; to cause the ripe olives to drop or, *as the striking* of it with a staff, to beat them off, when there are left *two or three berries at the top of the uppermost bough*. The word *amir* is only used here, and in verse 9. It signifies the upper bough or branch which is the highest part of the olive tree. So, it references a king, a prince, an emperor, or someone that has the command and government of others.

Therefore, two or three olives in the uppermost bough, are left, because they cannot be reached by the hand of the gatherer, nor by the staff of the striker. This is most probably a reference to Jerusalem, which was the highest part of the land of Israel. The king of Assyria could not reach it. *Four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof*; which escape the gleaner, shaker, or striker, for the same reason. These agricultural similes are very commonly used in Scripture since the people of Israel are frequently compared to grapes, and vines, and olives. (Isaiah 5:1, 7; Jeremiah 11:16; Hosea 9:10).

Saith Jehovah, the God of Israel; Isaiah punctuates God’s prophecy with this statement to confirm what God has just said, and to express its certainty. The Targum applies the metaphors in this way, “so shall the righteous be left alone in the world among the kingdoms, saith the Lord God of Israel.”

At that day shall a man look to his Maker. Instead of confiding in their strongly fortified places and armies, they shall look for aid and protection to the God that made them, and who alone can help them. National afflictions and judgments such as the destruction of America's twin towers in New York on 9-11-2001 often have the effect to turn the eyes of even a wicked and rebellious people to God. They feel their danger; they are convinced of their guilt; they see that no one but God can protect them; and for a time, they are willing, even by humiliation and fasting, to seek divine protection. Many are led to a saving grace salvation through difficult circumstances that are beyond their control to make right. It usually does not last long though as self-will and prosperity replace dependence on God.

Their eyes shall have respect of The Holy One of Israel. The God of Israel; the true God. As the Syrians were allied with the kingdom of Samaria or Ephraim, they were, of course, acquainted with the true God, and in some sense acknowledged him. In these times of impending calamity, they would be led to seek him, and implore his aid and protection. There is no reason to believe, however, that they would turn permanently to Him, or become his true worshippers. When faced with the terror and distress of warfare they would realize the inadequacy of worshipping idols.

And he shall not look to the altars. That is, the altars of the gods which the Syrians worshipped. These altars to the false gods had been erected in both the southern kingdom and the northern by its wicked kings, and particularly by Ahaz. Ahaz the king of the southern kingdom Judah, was attracted to an altar which he saw at Damascus when on a visit to Tiglath-pileser, and ordered Urijah the priest to construct one like it in Samaria, on which he subsequently offered sacrifice (II Kings 16:10–13). It is well known, also, that the kings of Israel and Judah often reared altars to false gods in the high places and the groves of the land (II Kings 21:3, 4, 5). The Ephraimites were particularly guilty in this respect (Hosea 8:11): '*Because Ephraim hath made many altars to sin, altars shall be unto him to sin.*'

Which his fingers have made. This references their idol worship and altars made by their own hands and fingers that would be no help to them, and people would be totally helpless in face of God's judgment (Isaiah 40:18–20; 41:29). The reference to the Asherim and the altars of incense points to Baal and the goddess Ashtoreth, who were worshipped in the Canaanite fertility cult (Deuteronomy 16:21).

Either the sun images. The glory of the sun makes it a natural object of worship. Sun worshipping is found in ancient Babylon and Assyria. This close proximity to Israel was one reason for them to engage in it. In Egypt it is the leading figure of the religion (Ra, and a special seat of sun-worship was Heliopolis). God provided many stern warnings against, sun-worship to the nation Israel (Leviticus 26:30; II Chronicles 14:5; 34:4, 7; Isaiah 17:8; 27:9; Ezekiel 6:4, 6). Many passages show that this form of idolatry penetrated deeply into Judah—even into its temple-worship (II Kings 23:5, 11; Ezekiel 8:16). Josiah's reformation realized these abuses (II Kings 23:5, 11; II Chronicles 34:4, 7), and both he and Ezekiel strenuously denounced them (Ezekiel 8:16).

From here to the end of the chapter the remaining passages in chapter 17 contain a message of a general admonition against not trusting God. There will no doubt be additional idolatry and trust the Israelites will place on them instead of God before the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. But, there will finally be an end to their adversarial relationship with Syria. It will occur in the Messianic Kingdom.

PEACE WILL COME BETWEEN ISRAEL AND SYRIA

God says that in the Messianic Kingdom He will bring peace between Israel and Damascus (Part of Assyria) through a conversion of their peoples to become believers and live with Israel in peace in the Messianic Kingdom.

Isaiah 19:23-25

²³In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian shall come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria; and the Egyptians shall worship with the Assyrians. ²⁴In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth; ²⁵for that Jehovah of hosts hath blessed them, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance (ASV, 1901).

Verse 23 describes a highway which connects Egypt, Israel and Assyria. In the Messianic Kingdom, when peace will be restored, all borders will be open, and this highway, a symbol of free trade trafficking, will be restored between these Middle Eastern states. The means by which this will occur is conversion (24–25). Not only will Egypt undergo a conversion experience, but so will the ancient area of Assyria. Assyria will become a blessing in the earth and will receive a blessing from God. The three former enemies will now be spiritually and economically unified. So, peace during the Messianic Kingdom will come between Israel and Assyria (part of Syria) by means of conversion. When this happens, there will be economic, political, and religious unity, because they will all worship the same God.

NEXT MESSAGE: THE BURDEN OF DAMASCUS CONTINUED

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