

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER THIRTY

JUDAH'S FAILURE - GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

ONCE more the Spirit of prophecy directs our attention to the internal condition of Judah in Isaiah's day when, threatened by the Assyrian under Sennacherib, they appealed to Egypt, that land from which they had once been delivered, for help. This, in the eyes of God, was a grievous sin, indicating their lack of confidence in Himself and their hope of securing help from the very power which had once enslaved them and from whose bondage they had been redeemed; first by blood, the blood of the passover lamb, and then by the omnipotent power of God who brought them triumphantly through the Red Sea, scattering its waters on either side and thus gathered them to Himself in the wilderness and eventually settled them in the land of promise.

To go down now to Egypt for help meant that they had forgotten God's dealings with them in the past and that they no longer dared to depend on Him for their present deliverance. In the opening verses we have the fourth woe of this series.

"Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin: That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore shall the strength of Pharaoh be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion. For his princes were at Zoan, and his ambassadors came to Hanes. They were all ashamed of a people that could not profit them, nor be an help nor profit, but a shame, and also a reproach" (verses 1-5).

The invasion of the Assyrian was but one of the evidences of God's displeasure with His people because of their waywardness. Instead of turning to the One they had sinned against, confessing their iniquities and judging themselves for their idolatry and their unreality, even in connection with the temple worship, they turned to their old enemy, hoping for assistance against the invader. It seemed, doubtless, to the leaders among them the path of wisdom thus to make a friend of Egypt in order that they might be strengthened against Assyria, but it was a mere human expedient and therefore doomed to failure. They hoped by such an alliance to ward off the impending danger.

How much wiser they would have been had they taken the place of repentance toward God and sought counsel, not of worldly-minded leaders, but of God Himself who was at this time speaking to them through Isaiah and other prophets. May we not see in their attitude a lesson for ourselves today? How apt we are in times of stress to depend upon some human expedient instead of relying on the living God.

It is always an evidence of declension when Christians look to the world for help rather than turning to the Lord Himself, whose chastening hand may be upon them because of unjudged sin. He always stands ready to meet His people in grace, and we are told that **“if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”** (1 John 1:9).

But we are ever prone to forget this and to try to find a way out of our difficulties by human means instead of reliance upon the omnipotent God. Just as Judah involved themselves in deeper trouble by their folly in turning to Egypt, so do we always make conditions worse when, instead of looking to God, we endeavor by fleshly means to extricate ourselves from the difficult circumstances into which our own failures have plunged us.

“The burden of the beasts of the south: into the land of trouble and anguish, from whence come the young and old lion, the viper and fiery flying serpent, they will carry their riches upon the shoulders of young asses, and their treasures upon the bunches of camels, to a people that shall not profit them. For the Egyptians shall help in vain, and to no purpose: therefore have I cried concerning this, Their strength is to sit still” (verses 6, 7).

Egypt is depicted here as a land of ravenous beasts such as are found in African jungles. Yet to this land, Judah sent their ambassadors, bearing rich treasure loaded upon camels and asses with which they hoped to procure the favor of the Egyptian ruler. To them it seemed the only way out, and they doubtless congratulated themselves on their astuteness and political strategy in attempting to make a close ally of a former enemy.

But their course was obnoxious to God because it involved utter forgetfulness of Himself.

Though they did not realize it, their strength would have been manifested by quietly waiting upon God, sitting still even though the Assyrian came closer and closer to them, assured that if they but relied on the Holy One of Israel, in His own due time He would grant complete deliverance.

It is always difficult to wait for God to intervene. We have instance after instance in Scripture of those who only brought trouble upon themselves by precipitate action, feeling that something must be done in order to stave off disaster, whereas had they but left the matter in the hands of God, He would have risen up in ample time to fulfill His own purposes of grace.

We need to distinguish between waiting on God and waiting for God. It is one thing to go to Him in the hour of stress and implore His delivering power; it is another thing to rest quietly in a sense of His infinite love and wisdom until He sees that the hour has struck to act on our behalf.

“Now go, write it before them in a table, and note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever: that this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord: which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits: get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us. Wherefore thus saith the Holy One of Israel, Because ye despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and stay thereon: therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking cometh suddenly at an instant. And he shall break it as the breaking of the potters’ vessel that is broken in pieces; he shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a sherd to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit” (verses 8-14).

It is clear from these words that God intended the record of Judah’s failure to be a salutary lesson to His people in future generations. For this purpose He would have all written in a book that it might be handed down from generation to generation. He knew well that even as in Isaiah’s time many in centuries yet to come would refuse to hear His voice and would seek to silence the messengers, turning away from the truth and going after false prophets, because like so many in Christendom today they had itching ears and preferred that which was pleasant and agreeable to that which called for self-judgment and repentance.

We need not suppose that the people of Judah said in so many words what is here recorded, but their attitude expressed what was in their hearts. Is not this just as true of vast numbers today? Outwardly they profess reverence for the Holy Scriptures and for the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, but their lives make it evident that they are without any real faith, nor have they any love for God’s truth when it runs contrary to their own desires.

Such a course, on the part of any who profess the name of the Lord, can only bring down judgment upon those who thus turn away from the truth and follow after that which pleases the flesh and seems to the natural or the carnal mind far more satisfactory than dependence upon the Word of God. Though Judah realized it not, they were like people standing beside a high wall whose foundations had been undermined and which was already bulging and about to fall upon them. Or, like a potter’s vessel which was soon to be broken into so many pieces that not one sherd could be found large enough to take up water or to be of any use whatever.

“For thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest shall ye be saved: in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not. But ye said, No: for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift. One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee: till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on an hill” (verses 15-17).

Beautiful, indeed, are the words of verse 15 - words that are ever true for the people of God, no matter what they are called upon to suffer or endure. It is as we learn to wait upon God, returning to Him in confession of past failure and resting upon His assurance of present forgiveness and cleansing, that we find not only peace of conscience but peace of heart; salvation from whatever it may be that has caused unrest and fear.

As we look to the living God in simple faith, ceasing from all self-effort, refusing to look to the world for that help which God alone can give, we find strength to lift us above the trial. But the people of Judah refused to receive this message.

Willfully they turned away from the advice of the prophet, whom God had sent to call them back to Himself. They would not heed His Word, nor cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils. How often has the Lord had to say to those whose unbelief grieved His heart, **“I would, but ye would not.”**

All preparations were made to flee upon horses at the approach of the enemy if help did not arrive in time, for they knew in their hearts that their dependence on Egypt might, after all, prove to be in vain. **“Therefore,”** said God, **“shall ye flee,”** and though they trusted in the swiftness of their steeds to enable them to evade capture, the enemy would be swifter than they and overtake and destroy them. When God brought them out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness, He told them that if they walked in obedience to His Word they need never fear their enemy for, in the day of battle, through the might of the Lord, one should chase a thousand, and two should put ten thousand to flight (Leviticus 26:8).

Now, however, because of their unbelief and disobedience, conditions would be reversed, and a thousand of Judah would flee from one Assyrian, and all of them before five of their ruthless enemies. What folly for men to put their confidence in flesh, only to prove, as so many have done, that the flesh profiteth nothing.

But once again, after having sought to reach their consciences, God, in remembrance of His covenant, declares that when His people have been chastened because of their sins He will bring them into blessing eventually, and so we read:

“And therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him. For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: thou shalt weep no more: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee. And though the Lord give you the bread of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers: and thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left” (verses 18-21).

Clearly the prophecy here speaks of millennial blessing when, after all the centuries of the sufferings of Israel and Judah, they shall return to the Lord and find in Him that forgiveness which He is always ready to bestow upon the contrite and penitent heart.

In that day, the day of the Lord’s power, He will bring them into everlasting blessedness: the sufferings of the past will seem but as an evil dream from which they have awakened, as they look up into the face of the Messiah they once despised and rejected, and find in Him an all-sufficient Saviour. No longer will they be led astray by the wisdom of man or by false visions, but led by the Lord Himself they will be guided in paths of righteousness.

Even when there might seem to be danger of turning away, either to the right hand or to the left, His own voice will direct them, saying, **“This is the way, walk ye in it.”** All tears will then be wiped away and all their sufferings past forever.

Surely no one can think that these words have ever been fulfilled in the past. They point forward to that which will be Israel’s glorious portion in the day when their lessons have been learned and they become subject to the instruction of Him whose mandates they once refused to obey.

“Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold: thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth; thou shalt say unto it, Get thee hence. Then shall he give the rain of thy seed, that thou shalt sow the ground withal; and bread of the increase of the earth, and it shall be fat and plenteous: in that day shall thy cattle feed in large pastures. The oxen likewise and the young asses that ear the ground shall eat clean provender, which hath been winnowed with the shovel and with the fan. And there shall be upon every high mountain, and upon every high hill, rivers and streams of waters In the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day that the Lord bindeth up the breach of his people, and healeth the stroke of their wound” (verses 22-26).

Idolatry had often been their ruin in times past, but in that coming day they will abhor themselves as they remember the folly of which they have been guilty, In forsaking the one true and living God for the worship of senseless images which could neither see nor hear, and were unable to deliver them from the dangers that beset them. Casting their idols to one side, they will find their joy in the Lord and He will feed them with the living bread and refresh them with the water of life.

No doubt verse 23 will have a literal fulfillment, for in Messiah’s day He will satisfy the poor with bread, but we are surely warranted in seeing in it a promise of great spiritual blessing, for God’s Word is as food to the heart of him who meditates upon it, strengthening him in the inner man that he may know the will of God and have the power to do it.

The streams of living water, too, which flow down from the hills and the mountains may well speak to us of that river of the water of life, the Holy Ghost’s testimony to the risen Christ, which will bring joy to the heart of the people of God, not only in the heavenly sphere, but also in the earthly side of the kingdom yet to be set up.

“Behold, the name of the Lord cometh from far, burning with his anger, and the burden thereof is heavy: his lips are full of indignation, and his tongue as a devouring fire: and his breath, as an overflowing stream, shall reach to the midst of the neck, to sift the nations with the sieve of vanity: and there shall be a bridle in the jaws of the people, causing them to err. Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord, to the mighty One of Israel.

“And the Lord shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones. For through the voice of the Lord shall the Assyrian be beaten down, which smote with a rod. And in every place where the grounded staff shall pass, which the Lord shall lay upon him, it shall be with tabrets and harps: and in battles of shaking will he fight with it. For Tophet is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it” (verses 27-33).

These closing verses speak of mingled judgment and blessing. Judgment upon the nations who, throughout the centuries, have sorely afflicted Israel, and blessing upon the covenant people when they return to the Lord and all His promises of both temporal and spiritual prosperity are fulfilled toward them.

Undoubtedly, the judgments spoken of refer, in the first instance, to those which fell upon Sennacherib and his armies; but they surely go far beyond that, reaching down to the last days when another great Gentile power, as we have seen, will rise up in its God-defying might and seek to destroy Judah and take possession of Immanuel’s land.

In His indignation the Lord will pour out the vials of His wrath upon the Assyrian of that coming day so that his destruction will be complete and eternal. With him, too, will fall judgment upon every other enemy who has threatened the peace of the covenant nation.

The last verse is of a somewhat cryptic character, but with the help of other scriptures we need not have difficulty in understanding it. We should remember that no prophecy of Scripture is of its own interpretation, as we are told in II Peter 1:20. **“Private interpretation”** there does not mean the effort of an individual to understand the Scriptures apart from the instruction of ecclesiastical authorities, as taught by the Roman Catholic Church, but the point is that all the prophecies of Scripture need to be considered as one whole, for they are all given by the same Spirit, and are intimately connected one with the other.

So here we read that Tophet is ordained of old, **“yea, for the king it is prepared,”** that is, “for the king also it is prepared.” The Assyrian we know, but who is the king here referred to? If we turn to Daniel 11:36 we read of the willful **“king”** who will head up the apostate Jewish nation during the time of the great tribulation.

He is clearly identical with the Man of Sin, the Lawless One of II Thessalonians 2, and also with the second beast who looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon, of Revelation 13. Both this sinister one and the **“Beast”** will be cast alive into a lake of fire, as we know from Revelation 19:19, 20.

Some would identify the Assyrian with the Beast, and this may, perhaps, be correct, though to the present writer the two seem to be very distinct personages, the Beast being the little horn of Daniel 7 and the Assyrian, or king of the north, the little horn of Daniel 8. The doom of all of these enemies of God and His people will be everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

Tophet was of old the lowest part of the valley of the Son of Hinnom, that is, Gehenna, the place where the filth and refuse of the city of Jerusalem was consumed, together with the carcasses of criminals and of beasts. In the days of Israel's worst idolatry, it was there that the image of Moloch was set up, and to this vile god human sacrifices were offered, little children and young maidens being cast alive into the red-hot arms of the monstrous image that was itself a burning furnace, heated red hot. As the priests of Moloch beat their drums and chanted their idolatrous songs to drown out the cries of the burning victims, God looked down with abhorrence upon the terrible iniquity thus manifested, and so Tophet became the synonym for the lowest hell; and into that place of outer darkness will be cast the last enemies of God as the Day of the Lord is ushered in and man's day comes to a close.

~ end of chapter 30 ~

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