

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DAMASCUS AND EPHRAIM

NOW WE COME TO CONSIDER the burden of Damascus. Closely linked with Damascus we have the nation of Israel, generally known as Ephraim after the break with Judah. Because of the fact that they had formed an alliance with Syria, the kingdom of which Damascus was the capital, they must share in the judgment that was about to fall on that proud city and the Syrian dominion.

Damascus is sometimes said to be the oldest city in the world. This may or may not be so, but it certainly has existed through several millennia and has passed through many wars and other distressing experiences, yet it stands today as a great commercial center in the midst of a beautiful district - so strikingly beautiful that we are told that when Mohammed and his army drew near the city and looked down upon it from a hilltop, the Arabian false prophet turned to his followers and said, "It is given to men to enter but one Paradise. We will not go into Damascus," and so he and his cohorts turned away.

At the time when Isaiah prophesied, Sennacherib's hosts were rapidly moving toward Israel and Syria and it is of this onslaught that the first verses speak.

"The burden of Damascus, Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap. The cities of Aroer are forsaken: they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid. The fortress also 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 the Lord of hosts. And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean, And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim" (verses 1-5).

There were two cities or districts known as Aroer. One, east of the Dead Sea in the land of Moab, the other near to Damascus. It is evidently this latter that is here in view. As a result of the Assyrian attack, Damascus and all the surrounding towns and villages were to fall a prey to this great eastern power. Israel, too, was to suffer at the hand of the Assyrian.

All of this has had its fulfillment, and yet we may look upon the entire passage as prophetic of that which will take place again in the last days when God will deal once more both with Israel and the nations. In that time, as of old, a remnant of Jacob will be preserved who will seek the face of the Lord.

“Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the Lord God of Israel. At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images” (verses 6-8).

This remnant is distinguished in many of the books of the prophets and comes before us clearly again in the New Testament. It is this godly company who will turn to the Lord in the last days and in whom **“all Israel shall be saved”** (Romans 11:26). Many have thought that this implied that the entire nation would be delivered in the time of Jacob’s trouble, but we need to remember that **“they are not all Israel, which are of Israel,”** and that it is the remnant in whom God recognizes the true seed of Jacob. These will be preserved in the last time of trouble as they were in the past, and through them the land will again be inhabited. Abhorring idolatry, they will find their resource in the God of their fathers and as they look to Him for protection He will undertake for them.

“In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel: and there shall be desolation. Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow” (verses 9-11).

Are we to take these words literally or figuratively?

Possibly both, for they surely picture the folly of Israel in days gone by when although they had turned away from the Lord God of hosts, they still encouraged themselves to believe that they should prosper in their sinful condition, and so they planted lovely gardens and built great cities only to be visited at last by divine judgment.

But may we not see in these verses something that perhaps has had its literal fulfillment on more than one occasion in the past, and at the present time is being fulfilled again? It is a well-known fact that during the long years of Turkish misrule, the land of Palestine was almost denuded of trees. The forests of Lebanon had long since been cut down and the wood used for many different purposes. The trees that once grew upon the Mount of Olives and Mt. Scopus were, we are told by Josephus, all cut down by Titus and used during the siege of Jerusalem.

During the last century of Turkish dominion the Ottoman Government put a tax on all trees, which was so exorbitant that the inhabitants of Palestine rebelled against it, and rather than pay it cut down nearly every tree on their estates.

But when, after the First World War, the mandate of Palestine was entrusted to Great Britain, one of the first things the British Government set in motion was the reforestation of the mountains of Lebanon, thousands upon thousands of young trees being planted upon those heights, while thousands of eucalyptus, or blue gum trees, were imported from Australia and planted in the swampier parts of the country in order to assist in draining the land.

Following this, the returning Jews immediately began planting oliveyards and orchards of orange and other citrus fruits so that, literally, the entire country was planted with strange slips, and it certainly began to look as though Palestine had a wonderfully prosperous era before it.

But all has not been according to the hope of the Jews. Troubles and disasters have fallen upon the land. Forest fires have again destroyed many of the trees on Lebanon, and what the future has in store we dare not attempt to say except that Scripture depicts great and terrible trials such as Jacob has never known in the past. Surely the harvest will be a day of grief and desperate sorrow. How this should move our hearts to cry to God for the salvation of Israel and to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

“Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. And behold at eventide trouble; and before the morning he is not. This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us” (verses 12-14).

While these words also have had a primary fulfillment in the destruction of Israel’s foes in the past, notably the Assyrian of Isaiah’s day and the Chaldeans later on, yet they also coincide with what our Lord Himself has prophesied concerning the great tribulation, preceded by the time when nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; when the sea and the waves shall roar and there shall be earthquakes in divers places and men’s hearts shall fail them for fear of looking after the things that are coming upon the earth.

As the closing hour of tribulation strikes, the nations shall be gathered together against Jerusalem. The hosts of the Gentiles will come from the east, the north, and the west to engage in bloody conflict, seeking to obtain possession of Immanuel’s land, but the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory will bring the last great war to an end, when the Beast and the False Prophet and their adherents will perish by the breath of the Lord, and the hosts of Gog and Magog and the kings of the sun-rising will be destroyed by the omnipotent power of God acting for the deliverance of His people, Israel.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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