

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER TEN

THE ASSYRIAN AND HIS DOOM

IT IS a well-known principle of Scripture interpretation to recognize a double application or fulfillment of many prophecies. Conditions through which Israel and the nations have passed already often depict circumstances that will yet have to be faced in the future, in the days of the great tribulation, the time of Jacob's trouble, when divine wrath will be poured out upon guilty and apostate Christendom and Judaism alike. We see this set forth in the present chapter which deals primarily with Judah and Assyria in the days of King Hezekiah, but which also looks forward to the time when the last great Assyrian, the haughty enemy of the Jews in the time of the end, will be destroyed in Immanuel's land ere he can wreak his vengeance upon the remnant nation who will be gathered back to God and to their land at that time. Only as we keep these two applications of the prophetic word before us can we understand aright what is here set forth.

In the opening verses we see Judah's sad internal condition calling for judgment on the part of the God they professed to serve but whom they had so grievously dishonored.

“Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; To turn aside the needy from Judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless! And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? To whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory? Without me they shall bow down under the prisoners, and they shall fall under the slain. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” (verses 1-4).

Another solemn woe is pronounced upon those who in their pride and selfishness issued unrighteous decrees in order to legalize their oppression of the poor and then enriched themselves at the expense of the fatherless. Monopolies are not a recent expression of the selfishness of the human heart. In Judah, as in our civilized lands today, there were those who counted it a good business to take advantage of others in adverse circumstances and to profit by the ruin of their less fortunate fellows. All this is hateful to Him who is a God of judgment and by whom actions are weighed. Any economic system that is built up on the disregard of the rights of the poor will inevitably be destroyed at last.

Then what of the men who have ignored the Word of the Lord and gloried in their success while trampling on their competitors and forcing them to yield to their demands or go down in ruin? **“What”**, asks the prophet, “will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the desolation which shall come from far? To whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory?” God has decreed that them that honor Him, He will honor, and they who despise Him shall be lightly esteemed. He permits men and nations to go just so far in their own willful way; then He deals with them in His indignation, sweeping away their ill-gotten wealth and causing them to bewail the luxuries which they can no longer retain. What can men say to this? Where can they turn to save themselves from even greater disaster?

In Judah’s case the overrunning of the land by the armies of Sennacherib was the cause of much of their suffering, but was permitted by God as chastening for their sins. Without His deliverance they were helpless to defend themselves, and so would be taken as prisoners or slain by the cruel foe.

God addressed the Assyrians directly in the next section and that in a way that shows He had far more than the invasion of Sennacherib in view. The passage looks on to the final enemy in the last days.

“O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few. For he saith, Are not my princes altogether kings? Is not Calno as Carchemish? is not Hamath as Arpad? is not Samaria as Damascus? As my hand hath found the kingdoms of the idols, and whose graven images did excel them of Jerusalem and of Samaria; shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols? Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks” (verses 5-12).

Notice that it is when the Lord has performed His whole work on Mount Zion and Jerusalem that the Assyrian is to be punished. This needs to be kept in mind as the passage is read and studied.

When King Ahaz was threatened with utter ruin by the kings of Israel and Syria, he sent to the king of Assyria for help - only to find later that this covetous ruler aspired to complete ascendancy over all the lands to the west, including Judah. Later Sennacherib descended on the land like a mighty torrent, his army driving all before it until it was destroyed by pestilence in one night as it besieged Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. This terrible ruthless enemy became the type of the godless foe which, in the last days, will attempt to bring Palestine under its control, only to be destroyed by omnipotent power on the mountains of Israel.

As the rod of the Lord’s anger, Assyria was used, as other nations had been used, before and since, to chasten the people of God because of their turning away from Himself; but in the day of their repentance He would destroy the enemy that had brought disaster upon Judah.

On the part of the haughty destroyer there was no realization of the fact that he was just a rod in the hand of the Lord, the God whose name he despised, but he was to learn at last by bitter experience that after he had been used to punish “**an hypocritical nation**” he, himself, was doomed to utter destruction. To him Jerusalem was but another city to be overthrown as he had destroyed so many others, but he was to learn that the God whose temple was in that city was supreme above all that men called gods and which had been powerless to deliver these pagan cities out of his hands. The Lord’s whole work upon Mount Zion and on Jerusalem will mean the return of His people to Himself. Then in the days that He takes them up again as a nation He will deal with the Assyrian and with all who have afflicted them.

“For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man: and my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped. Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood. Therefore shall the Lord, the Lord of hosts, send among his fat ones leanness; and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire. And the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day; and shall consume the glory of his forest, and of his fruitful field, both soul and body: and they shall be as when a standardbearer fainteth. And the rest of the trees of his forest shall be few, that a child may write them” (verses 13-19).

Not understanding the use that God was making of him, the Assyrian vaunted himself as though he accomplished everything and won all his victories because of his own wisdom and prudence. So he had robbed and oppressed the nations, including Israel and Judah, ruthlessly and heartlessly. To him all other people were but as the eggs in the nests of birds that were open to be despoiled and their armies were as helpless as the mother birds when their nests were rifled. Knowing not that he was but as an axe in the hand of him who hewed down the trees of the forest, he boasted as though the power and might were all his own, and so he magnified himself against the One who designed to use him to chasten the nations because of their wickedness and corruption.

Therefore in the reckoning day that was coming, God would deal as sternly with him as he had dealt with others, and as he had sown hatred and cruelty so he should reap indignation and wretchedness. In that day of the Lord’s triumph He will vindicate the remnant in Israel who have put their trust in Him, and they will be as a flame to devour the nations that have sought their destruction. As in the days of Ahasuerus and Mordecai the Jews will execute judgment on those who had plotted to destroy them and root them out of the earth. The Word of God will be fulfilled concerning His promise that while He would punish His people in measure for their sins He would never break His covenant with them - a covenant made first to Abraham and confirmed to David. Although a full end will be made of many of the nations that have afflicted Israel He will not make a full end of them, as we see in the verses that follow.

“And it shall come to pass in that day, that the remnant of Israel, and such as are escaped of the house of Jacob, shall no more again stay upon him that smote them; but shall stay upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God. For though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall return: the consumption decreed shall overflow with righteousness. For the Lord God of hosts shall make a consumption, even determined, in the midst of all the land” (verses 20-23).

When the judgments of God are being poured out upon the earth in the dark days of the great tribulation, a remnant of the Jews will turn to the Lord in deep repentance and in living faith. These will prove the greatness of His mercy and the unfailing character of His promises. No longer relying for their help on the powers that persecuted and failed them in the hour of their need, as when Ahaz turned first to Assyria and then to Egypt in his desperate plight, they will find their resource and protection in God Himself.

The prophetic Word is clear and free of all obscurity. Only unbelief can deny its definite application to a literal remnant of the sons of Jacob when they turn to the Lord in the time of their greatest trouble. Then He will awake and will come to their help, and He will save the nation in the remnant.

We need to remember that they are not all Israel which are of Israel. The great majority **“as the sand of the sea”** will go into utter apostasy and be destroyed in their sins, but a remnant shall return and be acknowledged by God as His people. And so, as we learn in Romans 11, **“All Israel shall be saved,”** for this remnant will be the true Israel in that day of the Lord’s power.

In view of this declaration of the divine purpose, God calls upon His people to trust His Word and not to fear the Assyrian, proud and powerful though he may be.

“Therefore thus saith the Lord God of hosts, O my people that dwellest in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrian: he shall smite thee with a rod, and shall lift up his staff against thee, after the manner of Egypt. For yet a very little while, and the indignation shall cease, and mine anger in their destruction. And the Lord of hosts shall stir up a scourge for him according to the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb: and as his rod was upon the sea, so shall he lift it up after the manner of Egypt. And it shall come to pass in that day, that his burden shall be taken away from off thy shoulder, and his yoke from off thy neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing” (verses 24-27).

In clear and definite terms, the prophet predicts the overthrow of the enemy who was hammering, as it were, at the gate of Jerusalem. God would prevent the carrying out of his purpose even though it might seem for a time that Judah’s case was hopeless. Literally, all was fulfilled in due time so far as the prophecy had to do with the Assyrian of the past. When in the last days another mighty power comes against Palestine from the same region as that occupied by the Assyrians of old, his doom will be just as certain as was that of the enemy in the past.

The progress of the Assyrian army marching down through the land is depicted graphically in the verses that close this chapter.

“He is come to Aiath, he is passed to Migron; at Michmash he hath laid up his carriages: they are gone over the passage: they have taken up their lodging at Geba; Ramah is afraid; Gibeah of Saul is fled. Lift up thy voice, O daughter of Gallim: cause it to be heard unto Laish. O poor Anathoth! Madmenah is removed; the inhabitants of Gebim gather themselves to flee. As yet shall he remain at Nob that day: he shall shake his hand against the mount or the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem. Behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, shall lop the bough with terror: and the high ones of stature shall be hewn down, and the haughty shall be humbled. And he shall cut down the thickets of the forest with iron, and Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one” (verses 28-34).

Prophecy is history written beforehand, and here Isaiah foretold the path that the Assyrian would take as he marched through Palestine, wreaking his vengeance upon city after city; but the closing verses tell of his defeat at last when the Lord of hosts intervened. In His mighty power for the deliverance of those who cried to Him in the hour of their distress. No military strategy, no weapons of war would avail to save the haughty invader when the hand of God was stretched out against him.

What a lesson for faith we have here! These things, while applying directly to Judah and her foes, have precious lessons for us today. It is not true that God is on the side of the greatest armies, as some have said. He stands ready to uphold all who put their confidence in Him and who rely, not upon an arm of flesh but upon His omnipotence and unchanging love for His own.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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