

CHAPTER 17

Syria and Ephriam were confederate against Judah (~~2301~~ Isaiah 7:1, 2), and, they being so closely linked together in their counsels, this chapter, though it be entitled “the burden of Damascus” (which was the head city of Syria), reads the doom of Israel too.

I. The destruction of the strong cities both of Syria and Israel is here foretold (v. 1-5 and v. 9-11).

II. In the midst of judgment mercy is remembered to Israel, and a gracious promise made that a remnant should be preserved from the calamities and should get good by them (v. 6-8).

III. The overthrow of the Assyrian army before Jerusalem is pointed at (v. 12-14). In order of time this chapter should be placed next after Isaiah 9, for the destruction of Damascus, here foretold, happened in the reign of Ahaz, ~~1239~~ 2 Kings 16:9.

~~2371~~ ISAIAH 17:1-5

THE DOOM OF SYRIA AND ISRAEL

We have here the burden of Damascus; the Chaldee paraphrase reads it, *The burden of the cup of the curse to drink to Damascus in*; and, the ten tribes being in alliance, they must expect to pledge Damascus in this cup of trembling that is to go round.

1. Damascus itself, the head city of Syria, must be destroyed; the houses, it is likely, will be burnt, as least the walls, and gates, and fortifications demolished, and the inhabitants carried away captive, so that for the present it is *taken away from being a city*, and is reduced not only to a village, but to *a ruinous heap*, v. 1. Such desolating work as this does sin make with cities.

2. The country towns are abandoned by their inhabitants, frightened or forced away by the invaders: *The cities of Aroer* (a province of Syria so called) *are forsaken* (v. 2); the conquered dare not dwell in them, and the conquerors have no occasion for them, nor did they seize them for want, but wantonness; so that the places which should be for men to live in are for *flocks to lie down in*, which they may do, and none will disturb nor

dislodge them. Stately houses are converted into sheep-cotes. It is strange that great conquerors should pride themselves in being common enemies to mankind. But, how unrighteous soever they are, God is righteous in causing those cities to spue out their inhabitants, who by their wickedness had made themselves vile; it is better that *flocks should lie down there* than that they should harbour such as are in open rebellion against God and virtue.

3. The strongholds of Israel, the kingdom of the ten tribes, will be brought to ruin: *The fortress shall cease from Ephraim* (v. 3), that in Samaria, and all the rest. They had joined with Syria in invading Judah very unnaturally; and now those that had been partakers in sin should be made partakers in ruin, and justly. When *the fortress shall cease from Ephraim*, by which Israel will be weakened, the kingdom will cease from Damascus, by which Syria will be ruined. The Syrians were the ring-leaders in that confederacy against Judah, and therefore they are punished first and sorest; and, because they boasted of their alliance with Israel, now that Israel is weakened they are upbraided with those boasts: “*The remnant of Syria shall be as the glory of the children of Israel; those few that remain of the Syrians shall be in as mean and despicable a condition as the children of Israel are, and the glory of Israel shall be no relief or reputation to them.*” Sinful confederacies will be no strength, no stay, to the confederates, when God’s judgments come upon them. See here what the glory of Jacob is when God contends with him, and what little reason Syria will have to be proud of resembling the glory of Jacob.

(1.) It is wasted like a man in a consumption, v. 4. *The glory of Jacob* was their numbers, that they were as the sand of the sea for multitude; but this *glory shall be made thin*, when many are cut off, and few left. Then the *fatness of their flesh*, which was their pride and security, *shall wax lean*, and the body of the people shall become a perfect skeleton, nothing but skin and bones. Israel died of a lingering disease; the kingdom of the ten tribes wasted gradually; God was to them *as a moth*, ³⁸⁵²Hosea 5:12. Such is all the glory of this world: it soon withers, and is made thin; but thee is a far more exceeding and external weight of glory designed for the spiritual seed of Jacob, which is not subject to any such decay — fatness of God’s house, which will not *wax lean*.

(2.) It is all gathered and carried away by the Assyrian army, as the corn is carried out of the field by the husbandmen, v. 5. The corn is the glory of

the fields (¹⁹⁵³Psalm 65:13); but, when it is reaped and gone, where is the glory? The people had by their sins made themselves ripe for ruin, and their glory was as quickly, as easily, as justly, and as irresistibly, cut down and taken away, as the corn is out of the field by the husbandman. God's judgments are compared to the *thrusting in of the sickle when the harvest is ripe*, (⁶⁴⁵Revelation 14:15. And the victorious army, like the careful husbandmen in the valley of Rephaim, where the corn was extraordinary, would not, if they could help it, leave an ear behind, would lose nothing that they could lay their hands on.

²⁷⁶ISAIAH 17:6-8

THE DOOM OF SYRIA AND ISRAEL

Mercy is here reserved, in a parenthesis, in the midst of judgment, for a remnant that should escape the common ruin of the kingdom of the ten tribes. Though the Assyrians took all the care they could that none should slip out of their net, yet the meek of the earth were hidden in the day of the Lord's anger, and had their lives given them for a prey and made comfortable to them by their retirement to the land of Judah, where they had the liberty of God's courts.

1. They shall be but a small remnant, a very few, who shall be marked for preservation (v. 6): *Gleaning grapes shall be left in it*. The body of the people were carried into captivity, but here and there one was left behind, perhaps one of two in a bed when the other was taken, (⁴⁷³⁴Luke 17:34. The most desolating judgments in this world are short of the last judgment, which shall be universal and which none shall escape. In times of the greatest calamity some are kept safe, as in times of the greatest degeneracy some are kept pure. But the fewness of those that escape supposes the captivity of the far greatest part; those that are left are but like the poor remains of an olive tree when it has been carefully shaken by the owner; if there be *two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough* (out of the reach of those that shook it), that is all. Such is the *remnant according to the election of grace*, very few in comparison with the multitudes that walk on in the broad way.

2. They shall be a sanctified remnant, v. 7, 8. These few that are preserved are such as, in the prospect of the judgment approaching, had repented of

their sins and reformed their lives, and therefore were snatched thus as brands out of the burning, or such as having escaped, and becoming refugees in strange countries, were awakened, partly by a sense of the distinguishing mercy of their deliverance, and partly by the distresses they were still in, to return to God.

(1.) They shall look up to their Creator, shall enquire, *Where is God my Maker, who giveth songs in the night*, in such a night of affliction as this? ^{<850>}Job 35:10, 11. They shall acknowledge his hand in all the events concerning them, merciful and afflictive, and shall submit to his hand. They shall give him the glory due to his name, and be suitably affected with his providences. They shall expect relief and succour from him and depend upon him to help them. Their *eyes shall have respect to him, as the eyes of a servant to the hand of his master*, ^{<830>}Psalm 123:2. Observe, It is our duty at all times to have respect to God, to have our eyes ever towards him, both as our Maker (the author of our being and the God of nature) and as the Holy One of Israel, a God in covenant with us and the God of grace; particularly, when we are in affliction, our eyes must be towards the Lord, to *pluck our feet out of the net* (^{<855>}Psalm 25:15); to bring us to this is the design of his providence as he is our Maker and the work of his grace as he is the Holy One of Israel.

(2.) They shall look off from their idols, the creatures of their own fancy, shall no longer worship them, and seek to them, and expect relief from them. For God will be alone regarded, or he does not look upon himself as at all regarded. He that looks to his Maker must not *look to the altars, the work of his hands*, but disown them and cast them off, must not retain the least respect for *that which his fingers have made*, but break it to pieces, though it be his own workmanship — *the groves and the images*; the word signifies images made in honour of the sun and by which he was worshipped, the most ancient and most plausible idolatry, ^{<840>}Deuteronomy 4:19; ^{<825>}Job 31:26. We have reason to account those happy afflictions which part between us and our sins, and by sensible convictions of the vanity of the world, that great idol, cool our affections to it and lower our expectations from it.

ISAIAH 17:9-11

THE DOOM OF SYRIA AND ISRAEL

Here the prophet returns to foretel the woeful desolations that should be made in the land of Israel by the army of the Assyrians.

1. That the cities should be deserted. Even the strong cities, which should have protected the country, shall not be able to protect themselves: They *shall be as a forsaken bough and an uppermost branch* of an old tree, which has gone to decay, is forsaken of its leaves, and appears on the top of the tree, bare, and dry, and dead; so shall their strong cities look when the inhabitants have deserted them and the victorious army of the enemy pillaged and defaced them, v. 9. They shall be as the cities (so it may be supplied) which the Canaanites left, the old inhabitants of the land, because of the children of Israel, when God brought them in with a high hand, to take possession of that good land, cities which they built not. As the Canaanites then fled before Israel, so Israel should now flee before the Assyrians. And herein the word of God was fulfilled, that, if they committed the same abominations, *the land should spue them out, as it spued out the nations that were before them* (^{<883>}Leviticus 18:28), and that as, while they had God on their side, *one of them chased a thousand*, so, when they had made him their enemy, *a thousand of them should flee at the rebuke of one*; so that in the cities should be desolation, according to the threatenings in the law, ^{<851>}Leviticus 26:31; ^{<851>}Deuteronomy 28:51.

2. That the country should be laid waste, v. 10, 11. Observe here,

(1.) The sin that had provoked God to bring so great a destruction upon that pleasant land. It was *for the iniquity of those that dwelt therein*. “It is *because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation* and all the great salvations he has wrought for thee, hast forgotten thy dependence upon him and obligations to him, and *hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength*, not only who is himself a strong rock, but who has been thy strength many a time, or thou wouldst have been sunk and broken long since.” Note, The God of our salvation is the rock of our strength; and our forgetfulness and unmindfulness of him are at the bottom of all sin. *Therefore have we perverted our way, because we have forgotten the Lord our God*, and so we undo ourselves.

(2.) The destruction itself, aggravated by the great care they took to improve their land and to make it yet more pleasant.

[1.] Look upon it at the time of the seedness, and it was all like a garden and a vineyard; that pleasant land was replenished with pleasant plants, the choicest of its own growth; nay, so nice and curious were the inhabitants that, not content with them, they sent to all the neighbouring countries for strange slips, the more valuable for being strange, uncommon, far-fetched, and dear-bought, though perhaps they had of their own not inferior to them. This was an instance of their pride and vanity, and (that ruining error) their affection to be *like the nations*. *Wheat, and honey, and oil* were their staple commodities (²⁷¹³Ezekiel 27:17); but, not content with these, they must have flowers and greens with strange names imported from other nations, and a great deal of care and pains must be taken by hot-beds to make these plants to grow; the soil must be forced, and they must be covered with glasses to shelter them, and early in the morning the gardeners must be up to make the seed to flourish, that it may excel those of their neighbours. The ornaments of nature are not to be altogether slighted, but it is a folly to be over-fond of them, and to bestow more time, and cost, and pains about them than they deserve, as many do. But here this instance seems to be put in general for their great industry in cultivating their ground, and their expectations from it accordingly; they doubt not but their plants will grow and flourish. But,

[2.] Look upon the same ground at the time of harvest, and it is all like a wilderness, a dismal melancholy place, even to the spectators, much more to the owners; *for the harvest shall be a heap, all in confusion, in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow*. The harvest used to be a time of joy, of singing and shouting (²⁸¹⁰Isaiah 16:10); but this harvest the hungry eat up (⁶³⁸⁵Job 5:5), which makes it a day of grief, and the more because the plants were pleasant and costly (v. 10) and their expectations proportionably raised. The harvest had sometimes been a day of grief, if the crop was thin and the weather unseasonable; and yet in that case there was hope that the next would be better. But this shall be desperate sorrow, for they shall see not only this year's products carried off, but the property of the ground altered and their conquerors lords of it. The margin reads it, *The harvest shall be removed* (into the enemy's country or camp, ⁶³⁸³Deuteronomy 28:33) *in the day of inheritance* (when thou thoughtest to inherit it), *and there shall be deadly sorrow*. This is a good reason why we should not lay up our treasure in those things which we may so quickly be

despoiled of, but in that good part which shall never be taken away from us.

~~2372~~ ISAIAH 17:12-14

THE DOOM OF ISRAEL AND OF ASSYRIA

These verses read the doom of those that spoil and rob the people of God. If the Assyrians and Israelites invade and plunder Judah, if the Assyrian army take God's people captive and lay their country waste, let them know that ruin will be their lot and portion. They are here brought in,

1. Triumphant over the people of God. They relied upon their numbers. The Assyrian army was made up out of divers nations: it was *the multitude of many people* (v. 12), by which weight they hoped to carry the cause. They were very noisy, like the roaring of the seas; they talked big, hectoring, and threatened, to frighten God's people from resisting them, and all their allies from sending in to their aid. Sennacherib and Rabshakeh, in their speeches and letters, made a mighty noise to strike a terror upon Hezekiah and his people; the nations that followed them *made a rushing like the rushing of many waters*, and those mighty ones, that threaten to bear down all before them and carry away every thing that stands in their way. *The floods have lifted up their voice, have lifted up their waves*; such is the tumult of the people, and the heathen, when they rage, ~~4811~~ Psalm 2:1; 93:3.

2. Triumphed over by the judgments of God. They thought to carry their point by dint of noise; but woe to them (v. 12), for he *shall rebuke them*, that is, God shall, one whom they little think of, have no regard to, stand in no awe of; he shall give them a check with an invisible hand, *and then they shall flee afar off*. Sennacherib, and Rabshakeh, and the remains of their forces, shall run away in a fright, and shall be chased by their own terrors, *as the chaff of the mountains which stand bleak before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind*, like thistle-down (so the margin); they make themselves *as chaff before the wind* (~~4815~~ Psalm 35:5) and then *the angel of the Lord* (as it follows there), the same angel that slew many of them, shall chase the rest. God will make *them like a wheel, or rolling thing*, and then *persecute them with his tempest and make them afraid with his storm*, ~~4813~~ Psalm 83:13, 15. Note, God can dispirit the

enemies of his church when they are most courageous and confident, and dissipate them when they seem most closely consolidated. This shall be done suddenly (v. 14): *At evening-tide* they are very troublesome, and threaten trouble to the people of God; but *before the morning they are not*. At sleeping time they are cast into a deep sleep, ^{}Psalm 26:5, 6. It was in the night that the angel routed the Assyrian army. God can in a moment break the power of his church's enemies, even when it appears most formidable; and this is written for the encouragement of the people of God in all ages, when they find themselves an unequal match for their enemies; for *this is the portion of those that spoil us*, they shall themselves be spoiled. God will plead his church's cause, and those that meddle do it to their own hurt.