

CHAPTER 31

The prophecy of this chapter, as the two chapters before, is against Egypt, and designed for the humbling and mortifying of Pharaoh. In passing sentence upon great criminals it is usual to consult precedents, and to see what has been done to others in the like case, which serves both to direct and to justify the proceedings. Pharaoh stands indicted at the bar of divine justice for his pride and haughtiness, and the injuries he had done to God's people; but he thinks himself so high, so great, as not to be accountable to any authority, so strong, and so well guarded, as not to be conquerable by any force. The prophet is therefore directed to make a report to him of the case of the king of Assyria, whose head city was Nineveh.

I. He must show him how great a monarch the king of Assyria had been, what a vast empire he had, what a mighty sway he bore; the king of Egypt, great as he was could not go beyond him (v. 3-9).

II. He must then show him how like he was to the king of Assyria in pride and carnal security (v. 10).

III. He must next read him the history of the fall and ruin of the king of Assyria, what a noise it made among the nations and what a warning it gave to all potent princes to take heed of pride (v. 11-17).

IV. He must leave the king of Egypt to apply all this to himself, to see his own face in the looking-glass of the king of Assyria's sin, and to foresee his own fall through the perspective glass of his ruin (v. 18).

EZEKIEL 31:1-9

THE KING OF ASSYRIA'S GREATNESS

This prophecy bears date the month before Jerusalem was taken, as that in the close of the foregoing chapter about four months before. When God's people were in the depth of their distress, it would be some comfort to them, as it would serve likewise for a check to the pride and malice of

their neighbours, that insulted over them, to be told from heaven that the cup was going round, even the cup of trembling, that it would shortly be taken out of the hands of God's people and put into the hands of those that hated them, ²⁵¹²Isaiah 51:22, 23. In this prophecy,

I. The prophet is directed to put Pharaoh upon searching the records for a case parallel to his own (v. 2): *Speak to Pharaoh and to his multitude*, to the multitude of his attendants, that contributed so much to his magnificence, and the multitude of his armies, that contributed so much to his strength. These he was proud of, these he put a confidence in; and they were as proud of him and trusted as much in him. Now ask him, *Whom art thou like in thy greatness?* We are apt to judge of ourselves by comparison. Those that think highly of themselves fancy themselves as great and as good as such and such, that have been mightily celebrated. The flatterers of princes tell them whom they equal in pomp and grandeur. "Well," says God, "let him pitch upon the most famous potentate that ever was, and it shall be allowed that he is *like him in greatness* and no way inferior to him; but, let him pitch upon whom he will, he will find that *his day came to fall*; he will see there was *an end* of all *his perfection*, and must therefore expect the end of his own in like manner." Note, The falls of others, both into sin and ruin, are intended as admonitions to us not to be secure or *high-minded*, nor to think we stand out of danger.

II. He is directed to show him an instance of one whom he resembles in greatness, and that was the Assyrian (v. 3), whose monarchy had continued from Nimrod. Sennacherib was one of the mighty princes of that monarchy; but it sunk down soon after him, and the monarchy of Nebuchadnezzar was built upon its ruins, or rather grafted upon its stock. Let us now see what a flourishing prince the king of Assyria was. He is here compared to a stately cedar, v. 3. The glory of the house of David is illustrated by the same similitude, ²⁶⁷⁸Ezekiel 17:3. The olive-tree, the fig-tree, and the vine, which were all fruit-trees, had refused to be *promoted over the trees* because they would not leave their fruitfulness (¹⁰⁰⁸Judges 9:8, etc.), and therefore the choice falls upon the cedar, that is stately and strong, and casts a great shadow, but bears no fruit.

1. The Assyrian monarch was a tall cedar, such as the cedars in Lebanon generally were, of a *high stature*, and *his top among the thick boughs*; he was attended by other princes that were tributaries to him, and was surrounded by a life-guard of brave men. He surpassed all the princes in

his neighbourhood; they were all shrubs to him (v. 5): *His height was exalted above all the trees of the field*; they were many of them very high, but he overtopped them all, v. 8. The cedars, even those in the garden of Eden, which we may suppose were the best of the kind, *would not hide him*, but his top branches outshot theirs.

2. He was a spreading cedar; his branches did not only run up in height, but run out in breadth, denoting that this mighty prince was not only exalted to great dignity and honour, and had a name above the names of the great men of the earth, but that he obtained great dominion and power; his territories were large, and he extended his conquests far and his influences much further. This cedar, like *a vine*, sent forth *his branches to the sea, to the river*, ^{<801>}Psalm 80:11. *His boughs were multiplied; his branches became long* (v. 5); so that *he had a shadowing shroud*, v. 3. This contributed very much to his beauty, that he grew proportionably large as well as high. He was *fair in his greatness, in the length of his branches* (v. 7), very comely as well as very stately, *fair by the multitude of his branches*, v. 9. His large dominions were well managed, like a spreading tree that is kept in shape and good order by the skill of the gardener, so as to be very beautiful to the eye. His government was as amiable in the eyes of wise men as it was admirable in the eyes of all men. The *fir-trees* were not *like his boughs*, so straight, so green, so regular; nor were the branches of *the chestnut-trees like his branches*, so thick, so spreading. In short, *no tree in the garden of God*, in Eden, in Babylon (for that stood where paradise was planted), where there was every tree that was *pleasant to the sight* (^{<019>}Genesis 2:9), was like *to this cedar in beauty*; that is, in all the surrounding nations there was no prince so much admired, so much courted, and whom every body was so much in love with, as the king of Assyria. Many of them *did virtuously*, but he *excelled them all*, outshone them all. *All the trees of Eden envied him*, v. 9. When they found they could not compare with him they were angry and grieved that he so far outdid them, and secretly grudged him the praise due to him. Note, It is the unhappiness of those who in any thing excel others that thereby they make themselves the objects of envy; and *who can stand before envy?*

3. He was serviceable, as far as a standing growing cedar could be, and that was only by his shadow (v. 6): *All the fowls of heaven*, some of all sorts, *made their nests in his boughs*, where they were sheltered from the injuries of the weather. The *beasts of the field* put themselves under the

protection of *his branches*. There they were *levant* — *rising up*, and *couchant* — *lying down*; there they *brought forth their young*; for they had there a natural covert from the heat and from the storm. The meaning of all is, *Under his shadow dwelt all great nations*; they all fled to him for safety, and were willing to swear allegiance to him if he would undertake to protect them, as travellers in a shower come under thick trees for shelter. Note, Those who have power ought to use it for the protection and comfort of those whom they have power over; for to that end they are entrusted with power. Even the bramble, if he be anointed king, invites the trees to come and *trust in his shadow*, ^{<0005>}Judges 9:15. But the utmost security that any creature, even the king of Assyria himself, can give, is but like the shadow of a tree, which is but a scanty and slender protection, and leaves a man many ways exposed. Let us therefore flee to God for protection, and he will take us *under the shadow of his wings*, where we shall be warmer and safer than under the shadow of the strongest and stateliest cedar, ^{<078>}Psalms 17:8; 91:4.

4. He seemed to be settled and established in his greatness and power. For,

(1.) It was God that *made him fair*, v. 9. For by him kings reign. He was comely with the comeliness that God put upon him. Note, God's hand must be eyed and owned in the advancement of the great men of the earth, and therefore we must not envy them; yet that will not secure the continuance of their prosperity, for he that gave them their beauty, if they be deprived of it, knows how to turn it into deformity.

(2.) He seemed to have a good bottom. This cedar was not like the *heath in the desert, made to inhabit the parched places* (^{<076>}Jeremiah 17:6); it was not a *root in a dry ground*, ^{<052>}Isaiah 53:2. No; he had abundance of wealth to support his power and grandeur (v. 4): *The waters made him great*; he had vast treasures, large stores and magazines, which were as *the deep that set him up on high*, constant revenues coming in by taxes, customs, and crown-rents, which were *as rivers running round about his plants*; these enabled him to strengthen and secure his interests every where, for he *sent out his little rivers*, or conduits, *to all the trees of the field*, to water them; and when they had *maintenance from the king's palace* (^{<044>}Ezra 4:14), and *their country was nourished by the king's country* (^{<020>}Acts 12:20), they would be serviceable and faithful to him. Those that have wealth flowing upon them in great rivers find themselves obliged to send it out again in little rivers; for, *as goods are increased*,

those are increased that eat them, and the more men have the more occasion they have for it; yea, and still the more they have occasion for. The *branches* of this cedar *became long*, because of *the multitude of waters* which fed them (v. 5 and 7); *his root was by great waters*, which seemed to secure it that *its leaf should never wither* (^{<300B>}Psalm 1:3), that it should not *see when heat came*, (^{<247B>}Jeremiah 17:8. Note, Worldly people may seem to have an established prosperity, yet it only seems so, (^{<300B>}Job 5:3; (^{<300B>}Psalm 37:35.

^{<351D>}EZEKIEL 31:10-18

THE KING OF ASSYRIA'S DOWNFAL

We have seen the king of Egypt resembling the king of Assyria in pomp, and power, and prosperity, how like he was to him in his greatness; now here we see,

I. How he does likewise resemble him in his pride, v. 10. For, as face answers to face in a glass, so does one corrupt carnal heart to another; and the same temptations of a prosperous state by which some are overcome are fatal to many others too. “*Thou, O king of Egypt! hast lifted up thyself in height*, hast been proud of thy wealth and power, (^{<300B>}Ezekiel 29:3. And just so *he* (that is, the king of Assyria); when he had *shot up his top among the thick boughs his heart was immediately lifted up in his height*, and he grew insolent and imperious, set God himself at defiance, and trampled upon his people;” witness the messages and letter which *the great king, the king of Assyria*, sent to Hezekiah, (^{<230A>}Isaiah 36:4. How haughtily does he speak of himself and his own achievements! how scornfully of that great and good man! There were other sins in which the Egyptians and the Assyrians did concur, particularly that of oppressing God’s people, which is charged upon them both together (^{<257A>}Isaiah 52:4); but here that sin is traced up to its cause, and that was pride; for it is the *contempt of the proud* that they are *filled with*. Note, When men’s outward condition rises their minds commonly rise with it; and it is very rare to find a humble spirit in the midst of great advancements.

II. How he shall therefore resemble him in his fall; and for the opening of this part of the comparison,

1. Here is a history of the fall of the king of Assyria. For his part, says God (v. 11), *I have therefore*, because he was thus lifted up, *delivered him into the hand of the mighty one of the heathen*. Cyaxares, king of the Medes, in the twenty-sixth year of his reign, in conjunction with Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon in the first year of his reign, destroyed Nineveh, and with it the Assyrian empire. Nebuchadnezzar, though he was not then, yet afterwards became, very emphatically, the *mighty one of the heathen*, most mighty among them and most mighty over them, to prevail against them.

(1.) Respecting the fall of the Assyrian three things are affirmed: —

[1.] It is God himself that orders his ruin: *I have delivered him into the hand of the executioner; I have driven him out*. Note, God is the Judge, who puts down one and sets up another (⁴³⁷Psalm 75:7); and when he pleases he can extirpate and expel those who think themselves, and seem to others, to have taken deepest root. And the mightiest ones of the heathens could not gain their point against those they contended with if the Almighty did not himself deliver them into their hands.

[2.] It is his own sin that procures his ruin: *I have driven him out for his wickedness*. None are driven out from their honour, power, and possessions, but it is *for their wickedness*. None of our comforts are ever lost but what have been a thousand times forfeited. If the wicked are *driven away*, it is *in their wickedness*.

[3.] It is a *mighty one of the heathen* that shall be the instrument of his ruin; for God often employs one wicked man in punishing another. *He shall surely deal with him*, shall know how to manage him, great as he is. Note, Proud imperious men will, sooner or later, meet with their match.


(2.) In this history of the fall of the Assyrian observe,

[1.] A continuation of the similitude of the cedar. He grew very high, and extended his boughs very far; but his day comes to fall. *First*, This stately cedar was cropped: *The terrible of the nations cut him off*. Soldiers, who being both armed and commissioned to kill, and slay, and destroy, may well be reckoned among *the terrible of the nations*. They have lopped off his branches first, have seized upon some parts of his dominion and forced them out of his hands; so that in all *mountains* and *valleys* of the nations about, in the high-lands and low-lands, and *by all the rivers*, there were cities or countries that were broken off from the Assyrian monarchy, that

had been subject to it, but had either revolted or were recovered from it. Its feathers were borrowed; and, when every bird had fetched back its own, it was naked like the stump of a tree. *Secondly*, It was deserted: *All the people of the earth*, that had fled to him for shelter, have *gone down from his shadow and have left him*. When he was disabled to give them protection they thought they no longer owed him allegiance. Let not great men be proud of the number of those that attend them and have a dependence upon them; it is only for what they can get. When Providence frowns upon them their retinue is soon dispersed and scattered from them. *Thirdly*, It was insulted over, and its fall triumphed in (v. 13): *Upon his ruin shall all the fowls of the heaven remain*, to tread upon the broken branches of this cedar. Its fall is triumphed in by the other trees, who were angry to see themselves overtopped so much: *All the trees of Eden*, that were cut down and had fallen before him, *all that drank water of the rain of heaven*, as the stump of the tree that is left in the *south* is said to be *wet with the dew of heaven* (²⁷⁰²³Daniel 4:23) and to bud *through the scent of water* (³³⁴⁹Job 14:9), *shall be comforted in the nether parts of the earth* when they see this proud cedar brought as low as themselves. *Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris* — *To have companions in woe is a solace to those who suffer*. But, on the contrary, the trees of Lebanon, that are yet standing in their height and strength, *mourned for him*, and *the trees of the field fainted for him*, because they could not but read their own destiny in his fall. *Howl, fir-trees, if the cedar be shaken*, for they cannot expect to stand long, ³⁸¹²Zechariah 11:2.

[2.] An explanation of the similitude of the cedar. By the cutting down of this cedar is signified the slaughter of this mighty monarch and all his adherents and supporters; they are all *delivered to death*, to fall by the sword, as the cedar by the axe. He and his princes, who, he said, were *altogether kings*, go down to the grave, *to the nether parts of the earth*, in *the midst of the children of men*, as common persons of no quality or distinction. *They died like men* (³⁸²⁷Psalms 82:7); they were carried away with *those that go down to the pit*, and their pomp did neither protect them nor *descend after them*. Again (v. 16), He was *cast down to hell with those that descend into the pit*; he went into the state of the dead, and was buried as others are, in obscurity and oblivion. Again (v. 17), *They all that were his arm*, on whom he stayed, by whom he acted and exerted his power, *all that dwelt under his shadow*, his subjects and allies, and all that had any dependence on him, they all *went down* into ruin, down into the grave *with*

him, unto those that were slain with the sword, to those that were cut off by untimely deaths before them, under the load of guilt and shame. When great men fall a great many fall with them, as a great many in like manner have fallen before them.

[3.] What God designed, and aimed at, in bringing down this mighty monarch and his monarchy. He designed thereby, *First, To give an alarm* to the nations about, to put them all to a stand, to put them all to a gaze (v. 16): *I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall.* They were all struck with astonishment to see so mighty a prince brought down thus. It give a shock to all their confidences, every one thinking his turn would be next. *When he went down to the grave* (v. 15) *I caused a mourning,* a general lamentation, as the whole kingdom goes into mourning at the death of the king. In token of this general grief, *I covered the deep for him,* put that into black, gave a stop to business, in complaisance to this universal mourning. *I restrained the floods, and the great waters were stayed,* that they might run into another channel, that of lamentation. Lebanon particularly, the kingdom of Syria, that was sometimes in confederacy with the Assyrian, mourned for him; as the allies of Babylon,  Revelation 18:9. *Secondly, To give an admonition to the nations about,* and to their kings (v. 14): *To the end that none of all the trees by the waters,* though ever so advantageously situated, *may exalt themselves for their height,* may be proud and conceited of themselves and *shoot up their top among the thick boughs,* looking disdainfully upon others, nor *stand upon themselves for their height,* confiding in their own politics and powers, as if they could never be brought down. Let them all take warning by the Assyrian, for he once held up his head as high, and thought he kept his footing as firm, as any of them; but his pride went before his destruction, and his confidence failed him. Note, The fall of proud presumptuous men is intended for warning to others to keep humble. It would have been well for Nebuchadnezzar, who was himself active in bringing down the Assyrian, if he had taken the admonition.

2. Here is a prophecy of the fall of the king of Egypt in like manner, v. 18. He thought himself like the Assyrian *in glory and greatness,* over-topping *all the trees of Eden,* as the cypress does the shrubs. “But *thou also shalt be brought down,* with the other trees that are pleasant to the sight, as those in Eden. Thou shalt be *brought to the grave,* to the nether or lower *parts of the earth;* thou shalt *lie in the midst of the uncircumcised,* that die in their uncleanness, die ingloriously, die under a curse and at a distance

from God; then shall those whom thou hast trampled upon triumph over thee, saying, *This is Pharaoh and all his multitude*. See how mean he looks, how low he lies; see what all his pomp and pride have come to; here is all that is left of him.” Note, Great men and great multitudes, with the great figure and great noise they make in the world, when God comes to contend with them, will soon become little, less than nothing, such as Pharaoh and all his multitude.