

CHAPTER 17

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 17

This chapter contains a prophecy of the ruin of Syria and Israel, the ten tribes; who were in alliance; and also of the overthrow of the Assyrian army, that should come against Judah. The destruction of Damascus, the metropolis of Syria, and of other cities, is threatened, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:1,2) yea, of the whole kingdom of Syria, together with Ephraim or the ten tribes, and Samaria the head of them, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:3) whose destruction is expressed by various similes, as by thinness and leanness, and by the reaping and gathering of corn, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:4,5) and yet a remnant should be preserved, compared to gleanings, and a few berries on an olive tree, who should look to the Lord, and not to idols, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:6-8) and the reason of the desolation of their cities, and of their fields and vineyards, was their forgetfulness of the Lord, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:9-11) and the chapter is closed with a prophecy of the defeat of the Assyrian army, who are compared for their multitude and noise to the seas, and to mighty waters, and the noise and rushing of them, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:12) and yet should be, at the rebuke of God, as chaff, or any small light thing, before a blustering wind, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:13) and who, in the evening, would be a trouble to the Jews, and be dead before morning; which was to be the portion of the spoilers and plunderers of the Lord's people, (^{<23170>}Isaiah 17:14).

Ver. 1. *The burden of Damascus*, &c.] A heavy and grievous prophecy, concerning the destruction of it; the Arabic version is,

“the prophecy of Isaiah concerning Damascus;”

and the Targum is,

“the burden of the cup of cursing to give Damascus to drink.”

Behold, Damascus is taken away from [being] a city; a kingdom, as the Targum; it was the head of one, but now its walls were demolished, its houses pulled down, and its inhabitants carried captive; this was done by Tilgathpilneser king of Assyria, (^{<2160>}2 Kings 16:9) it had been a very ancient city, (see ^{<0150>}Genesis 15:2) and the head of the kingdom of Syria,

(^{<2308>}Isaiah 7:8), and though it underwent this calamity, it was rebuilt again, and was a city of great fame, when destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, (^{<2442>}Jeremiah 49:24,25) after which it was raised up again, and was in being in the apostle's time, and still is, (^{<4102>}Acts 9:22) (^{<4712>}2 Corinthians 11:32)

and it shall be a ruinous heap; or a heap of stones, as the Targum and Kimchi interpret it. A "behold" is prefixed to the whole, as being very wonderful and remarkable, unthought of, and unexpected.

Ver. 2. *The cities of Aroer are forsaken*, &c.] The inhabitants of them being slain, or carried captive, or obliged to flee. Aroer was a city by the river Arnon, on the borders of Moab and Ammon, (^{<1826>}Deuteronomy 2:36) (^{<1812>}Deuteronomy 3:12), it was originally in the hands of the Amorites, and sometimes in the hands of the Moabites and Ammonites: it was given by Moses to the Reubenites and Gadites, from whom it was taken by the Syrians, and in whose possession it seems to have been at this time; (see ^{<2103>}2 Kings 10:33) though Jarchi thinks it was now in the hands of Pekah king of Israel, and said to be forsaken, because the Reubenites and Gadites were now carried captive. Jerom^{f330} says it was seen in his time, upon the top of the mountain. Here it seems to design a country of this name, in which were many cities. Grotius thinks it was a tract of land in Syria, the same with the Aveira of Ptolemy^{f331}. Vitringa is of opinion that Damascus itself is meant, which was a double city, like that divided by the river Chrysorrhoeas, as this was by Arnon.

They shall be for flocks which shall lie down; instead of houses, there should be sheepcotes and shepherds' tents, and instead of men, sheep; and where streets were, grass would grow, and flocks feed and lie down; which is expressive of the utter desolation of these cities, or this tract of ground:

and none shall make [them] afraid; the flocks of sheep, timorous creatures, easily frightened; but so great should be the depopulation now, there would be no man upon the spot, or any pass by, to give them any disturbance.

Ver. 3. *The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim*, &c.] The ten tribes, now in confederacy with the Syrians, whose metropolis or fortress was Samaria, which seems to be intended here; and should be destroyed, at least taken out of the hands of the Israelites, and they be carried captive by Shalmaneser king of Assyria, (^{<2716>}2 Kings 17:6) and this may be understood, not of that particular city and fortress only, but of all their

strongholds, the singular being, put for the plural. The Targum is, “the government shall cease from Ephraim”; they shall have no more a king over them, nor have they to this day:

and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria; Damascus was the head city of Syria, where the kings of Syria had their palace; but now that and the rest of Syria should no more be a kingdom of itself, but should be subject unto others, as it has been ever since:

they shall be as the glory of the children of Israel, saith the Lord of hosts; that is, the Syrians, who were in alliance with Israel, should share the same fate; should be carried captive as they were; should have their metropolis and other cities, and their whole kingdom, taken from them, and be stripped of their grandeur and wealth, and have no more glory than they had; which was none at all; or at least very small, as the next verse shows (^{<23704>}Isaiah 17:4).

Ver. 4. *And in that day it shall come to pass, &c.]* It being much about the same time that both kingdoms were destroyed by the Assyrians:

[that] the glory of Jacob shall be made thin; the same with Ephraim and Israel, the ten tribes, whose glory lay in the superior number of their tribes to Judah; in the multitude of their cities, and the inhabitants of them; but now would be thinned, by the vast numbers that should be carried captive:

and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean: like a man in a consumption, that is become a mere skeleton, and reduced to skin and bones: the meaning is, that all their wealth and riches should be taken away; so the Targum,

“and the riches of his glory shall be carried away.”

Ver. 5. *And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, &c.]* The “standing” corn, as in the Hebrew text: “and reapeth the ears with his arm”; or “his arm reaps the ears”^{f332}; that is, with one hand he gathers the standing corn into his fist, and then reaps it with his other arm; and just so it should be with the people of Israel: they were like a field of standing corn, for number, beauty, and glory; the Assyrian was like a harvestman, who laid hold upon them, and cut them down, as thick and as numerous as they were, just as a harvestman cuts down the corn, and with as much ease and quick dispatch; they being no more able to stand before him than a

field of corn before the reaper! this was done both by Tilgathpilneser, (^{<1159>}2 Kings 15:29) and by Shalmaneser, (^{<1276>}2 Kings 17:6) kings of Assyria:

and it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim; the Targum renders it,

“the valley of giants.”

and so it is translated, (^{<1658>}Joshua 15:8 18:16) mention is made of it in (^{<1058>}2 Samuel 5:18,22 23:13) it was a valley not far from Jerusalem, as Josephus^{f333} says; who also calls it the valley of the giants: it is thought to have been a very fruitful place, where the ears of corn were very large and heavy, and so great care was taken in gathering and gleaning that none be lost: wherefore, as the former simile signifies the carrying off the people of Israel in great numbers by the above kings, this may signify, as some have thought, either the picking up of those that fled without, or the gleaning of them in after times by Esarhaddon, (^{<1502>}Ezra 4:2).

Ver. 6. *Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, &c.]* In Ephraim or Jacob; that is, in the ten tribes, a few of them should escape, a remnant should be saved; comparable, for the smallness of their number, to grapes that are gleaned after the vintage is got in: though Kimchi interprets it of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, who were but few, in comparison of the ten tribes, who were many; and Jarchi explains it of Hezekiah and his company, in the midst of Jerusalem, who were but few; and observes, that some of their Rabbins understood it of the few men that were left of the multitude of Sennacherib’s army, when it was destroyed; but the first sense is best: and the same thing is signified by another simile,

as the shaking of an olive tree; with the hand, when the fruit is ripe; or, “as the striking”^{f334} of it with a staff; to beat off the berries, when there are left

two [or] three berries at the top of the uppermost bough: the word “amir” is only used here, and in (^{<2370>}Isaiah 17:9) and signifies, as Kimchi says, the upper bough or branch; and so Aben Ezra interprets it, the highest part of the olive; and observes, that it so signifies in the language of Kedar, or the Arabic language; in which it is used for a king, a prince, an emperor, one that has the command and government of others^{f335}; and hence the word “amiral” or “admiral” comes: now two or three olive berries, being in the uppermost bough, are left, because they cannot be reached by the hand of the gatherer, nor by the staff of the striker. Kimchi applies this to

Jerusalem, which was the highest part of the land of Israel; and what was in it the hand of the king of Assyria could not reach:

four [or] five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof; which escape the gatherer, shaker, or striker, for the same reason. These similes are very aptly made use of, since the people of Israel are frequently compared to grapes, and vines, and olives, (²³⁷⁰Isaiah 5:1,7) (²⁴¹¹⁶Jeremiah 11:16 ²⁸⁹⁰Hosea 9:10):

saith the Lord God of Israel; this is added to confirm what is said, and to express the certainty of it; and shows that the Israelites are meant, to whom the Lord was a covenant God. The Targum applies the metaphors thus,

“so shall the righteous be left alone in the world among the kingdoms, saith the Lord God of Israel.”

Ver. 7. *At that day shall a man look to his Maker, &c.*] The one only living and true God, who has made him, and not he himself, nor any other creature; that is, such as are left, as before described, the remnant, according to the election of grace; these shall look to God for help and assistance, for supply, support, and protection; and to Christ particularly, who is the Maker of all things, without whom was not any thing made that is made, for all spiritual blessings; for righteousness and strength, for peace and pardon, for food, and all comfortable supplies of grace, for life and salvation; who is set up to be looked unto for these things; to whom men are directed and encouraged to look for them, both by himself, and by his ministers, and to whom saints in all ages have looked and have not been disappointed; and to this sense the following words incline:

and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel; who in this prophecy is said to be the Redeemer, (²³⁵⁴Isaiah 43:14 54:5) he is the Holy One that sprung from literal Israel; and is the sanctifier of mystical Israel; to which agrees the Targum,

“and his eyes shall hope for the Word of the Holy One of Israel:”

the Word by whom all things were made in the beginning, and who was made flesh and dwelt among men.

Ver. 8. *And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, &c.*] That is, to altars erected to the worship of idols, which are both the works

of men's hands, so as to serve at them, and sacrifice upon them. Kimchi observes, that the latter clause is not to be understood as belonging to the former, but as distinct from it, and signifies idols which men have made; otherwise all altars, even the altars of God, were the works of men, which yet it was right to look unto, and offer sacrifice upon; but idol altars, and idols themselves, are here meant: and a good man will not look unto his good works as altars to atone for sin; he knows that nothing that a creature can do can expiate sin; that his best works are such as are due to God, and therefore can never atone for past crimes; that Jesus Christ is only the altar, sacrifice, and priest, to whom he looks for, and from whom he receives the atonement:

neither shall respect [that] which his fingers have made, either the groves or the images; both might be said to be made by the fingers of men, the former being planted, and, the latter carved and fashioned by them; whether by groves are meant clusters of trees, where idols and altars were placed, or medals struck with such a representation on them, and also whatever images are here designed: the word signifies sun images, images made to represent the sun, or for the honour and worship of it. Aben Ezra says they were images made according to the likeness of chariots for the sun. The Targum renders it “temples”, such as were dedicated to the sun; though some understand by it sunny places, where their idols were set and sunburnt, as distinct from shady groves. Good men will not look to their own works, what their fingers have wrought, as groves to shelter them from divine wrath and vengeance, or as idols to bow down to, trust in, and depend upon for salvation; but reject them, and look to Christ only.

Ver. 9. *In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch,* &c.] Meaning the strong cities of Ephraim or Jacob, the ten tribes, which should be forsaken of their inhabitants; having fled from before the enemy, or being slain or carried captive; like a bough of a tree, that is forsaken stripped of its leaves, and an uppermost branch of a tree that is dead and dry, and has nothing on it:

which they left; or “as they left”, or “were left”:

because of the children of Israel; “from the face of” them; or for fear of them; that is, the same cities which the Canaanites left; and as they left them, or were left by them, for fear of the Israelites; the same, and in the same manner, shall they be left by the Israelites, for fear of the Assyrians; and so the Septuagint version reads the words,

“in that day thy cities shall be forsaken, in like manner as the Amorites and Hivites left them, from the face of the children of Israel;”

and this sense is given by Aben Ezra and Kimchi: though some interpret it of some places being spared and left for the remnant to dwell in; but what follows in this verse, and in the next (²³⁷⁰Isaiah 17:10), shows the contrary sense:

and there shall be desolation; over all those cities, and in all the land; though Aben Ezra particularly applies it to Samaria, the royal city. Jerom interprets the whole of the cities of Judea being forsaken of their inhabitants, when the Romans besieged Jerusalem, and made the land desolate; which calamity came upon them, for their neglect and forgetfulness of Jesus the Saviour.

Ver. 10. *Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation*, &c.] Who had been the author of salvation to them many a time, in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in various instances since; and yet they had forgot his works of mercy and goodness, and had left his worship, and gone after idols; and this was the cause of their cities being forsaken, and becoming a desolation:

and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength; or strong Rock, who had supplied and supported them, protected and defended them:

therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants; or “plants of pleasant fruit”^{f336}, or “plants of Naamanim”; and so Aben Ezra takes it to be the proper name of a plant in the Arabic language, and which he says is a plant that grows very quick; perhaps he means “Anemone”, which is so called in that language^{f337}, and is near to it in sound; though rather, not any particular plant is meant, but all sorts of pleasant plants, flowers, and fruit trees, with which the land of Israel abounded:

and shall set it with strange slips; with foreign ones, such as are brought from other countries, and are scarce and dear, and highly valued; and by “plants” and “slips” may be meant false and foreign doctrines, inculcating idolatry and superstition, which are pleasing to the flesh^{f338}.

Ver. 11. *In the day shall thou make thy plant to grow*, &c.] Not that it is in the power of man to make it grow; but the sense is, that all means and

methods should be used to make it grow, no cost nor pains should be spared:

and in the morning shall thou make thy seed to flourish; which may denote both diligence in the early care of it, and seeming promising success; and yet all should be in vain, and to no purpose:

[but] the harvest [shall be] a heap in the day of grief; or “of inheritance”; when it was about to be possessed and enjoyed, according to expectation, it shall be all thrown together in a heap, and be spoiled by the enemy: or, “the harvest” shall be “removed in the day of inheritance”^{f339}; just when the fruit is ripe, and going to be gathered in, the enemy shall come and take it all away; and so, instead of being a time of joy, as harvest usually is, it will be a time of grief and trouble,

and of desperate sorrow too, or “deadly”; which will leave them in despair, without hope of subsistence for the present year, or of having another harvest hereafter, the land coming into the hands of their enemies.

Ver. 12. *Woe to the multitude of many people*, &c.]. Not as lamenting the people of the Jews with Hezekiah, as if they were the words of the prophet bemoaning their condition, saying, “O the multitude”, &c. nor intending the Syrians and Israelites joined together against Judah; but the Assyrian army under Sennacherib, which consisted of people of many nations, and was very numerous, who are either threatened or called unto. A new subject is here begun, though a short one.

[which] make a noise like the noise of the seas; in a storm, when they foam and rage, and overflow the banks; this may refer both to the noise made by the march of such a vast army, the rattling of their armour and chariot wheels, and prancing of their horses; and to the hectoring, blustering, and blasphemous speeches of Sennacherib and Rabshakeh:

and to the rushing of nations, or “rushing nations”,

[that] make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters; which denotes the fury and force with which they come, threatening to bear down all before them, as an inundation of water does.

Ver. 13. *The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters*, &c.]. With great force and noise, and run over the whole land, as the Assyrian army did, until it came to Jerusalem, and there it stopped; (see ~~XXV~~ Isaiah 8:7,8):

but [God] shall rebuke them; as he did the waters of the Red Sea, (^{<1346>}Psalm 106:9) and as Christ rebuked the winds and sea, and made a calm, (^{<1083>}Matthew 8:26). The word “God” is not in the text, but rightly supplied; for as none but he can rebuke the mighty waters of the sea, so none but he could have destroyed such an army in the manner it was, and wrought such a salvation for his people. The phrase, is expressive both of his wrath and power.

And they shall flee afar off; from Jerusalem to Nineveh, reckoned to be six hundred and eighty four miles from thence: or, “he shall flee afar off”^{f340}; that is, Sennacherib, and the few that escaped with him, for, his army was destroyed; (see ^{<1293>}2 Kings 19:36):

and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind; chaff upon the floor is easily chased away with the fan, and much more easily chaff upon the mountains with the wind; it was usual with the Jews to thresh their corn, and winnow it on hills and mountains, to which the allusion is; (see ^{<400>}2 Chronicles 3:1) or “the dust of the mountains”, as some^{f341} render it, which is more exposed to the wind than that in the valleys. Kings and great men of the earth are but as dust with God; and the higher they are, or they exalt themselves, the more they are exposed to the power of his wrath, and as easily cast down as the dust is scattered by the wind:

and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind; or “like a wheel”^{f342}, as the word is sometimes rendered; or any round thing, as a round wisp of straw or stubble, which is easily and swiftly moved and rolled along, especially by a strong wind. Jarchi interprets it of the flower of thorns; that is, the down of the thistle, which, when blown off, rolls up, and, being exceeding light, is carried away at once; (see ^{<1983>}Psalm 83:13) all which shows what poor light things the greatest of men are in the hands of God, and with what ease he can chase them from place to place, and out of the world, when it is his pleasure.

Ver. 14. *And behold at eveningtide trouble*, &c.] Or terror^{f343} and consternation; which some understand of that which was in the Assyrian army, when the Angel of the Lord destroyed it, taking “evening for night”, for it was in the night that that was done; so Jarchi interprets it of Shedim, a sort of spirits or demons, that came against the enemy, and troubled and frightened them: but it is best to take it in the more common sense, of the trouble that Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were in, on the

evening or night before their deliverance; the whole land of Judea round about them being laid waste, their city besieged by a powerful army, and the enemy blaspheming, blustering, and triumphing:

[and] before the morning he [is] not; Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, he was not before Jerusalem, he was fled: or “it was not”^{f344}; the Assyrian army was not, it was destroyed by an angel in the night, and in the morning were all dead corpses, (~~1288~~2 Kings 19:35) or trouble was not, that was all over, joy came in the morning; (see ~~1816~~Psalm 30:5):

this [is] the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us; these are the words of the prophet, and of the people of God, he represents, making observation upon, and use of the above dispensation, though not confining it to that; and their meaning is, that this is not the case of these Assyrians only, but of all the enemies of God’s people, who, sooner or later, come to destruction; and which is not by chance, but by the appointment and disposition of God, who allots and portions out ruin unto them, as the just reward of their works; (see ~~1819~~Job 20:29 ~~1916~~Psalm 11:6).