

CHAPTER 31

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 31

This chapter denounces woe to those that trusted in the Egyptians; assures the Jews of God's care and protection of them; calls them to repentance, and foretells the destruction of the Assyrian army. The sin of those that trusted in Egypt, with the reasons of their trust, and not looking to the Lord, and seeking him, is declared in (²³¹⁰Isaiah 31:1) and their folly exposed in so doing; since the Lord is wise, powerful, and unchangeable, and the Egyptians frail and weak; so that the helper and the helped must fall before him, (²³¹²Isaiah 31:2,3) whereas protection might be expected from the Lord, as is promised, whose power is like that of the lion, and whose tender care is like that of birds to defend their young, (²³¹⁴Isaiah 31:4,5) wherefore the Jews are called upon to return to the Lord by repentance, from whom they had revolted; which would be shown by their detestation of idolatry, the sin they had been guilty of, (²³¹⁶Isaiah 31:6,7) and the chapter is closed with a prophecy of the ruin of the Assyrian army, and the flight of their king, (²³¹⁸Isaiah 31:8,9).

Ver. 1. *Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help*, &c.] Or, "O ye that go down", &c.; what poor foolish creatures are you! And in the end what miserable and wretched ones will ye be! Such were the Jewish rulers and people, who either went themselves, or sent ambassadors to the king of Egypt, to supply them with men and horses against the king of Assyria, contrary to the express command of God, which forbid them returning to Egypt; and which showed their unmindfulness of deliverance from thence, and their not having a due sense of that mercy upon them; as well as their so doing exposed them to the danger of being drawn into the superstitions and idolatries of that people:

and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because [they] are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; having their dependence upon, and placing their confidence in, the strength and numbers of the cavalry of the Egyptians:

but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord; they did not look unto the Lord with an eye of faith, nor seek him by prayer and supplication; or ask any counsel or instruction of him, as the Targum paraphrases the last clause; so that their sin lay not only in their confidence in the creature, but in their neglect of the Lord himself; and so all such persons are foolish and miserable, that trust in an arm of flesh, that place their confidence in creature acts, in their own righteousness, duties, and services, and have no regard to the Holy One of Israel, to the holiness and righteousness of Christ, neglect that, and do not submit to it; thus the Targum interprets the former clause of the Word of the Holy One of Israel, the essential Word Christ.

Ver. 2. *Yet he also [is] wise*, &c.] That is, God, the Holy One of Israel, is, whom they disregarded; and wiser too than the Egyptians, to whom they sought for help, and who were thought to be a wise and political people; and wiser than themselves, who imagined they acted a prudent part, in applying to them; so wise as to know all their schemes, and able to confound them, as well as most certainly and fully to complete his own; and it would have been therefore the highest wisdom to have sought to him, and not to men:

and will bring evil; the evil of punishment or affliction on wicked men, which he has threatened, and which they could in no wise escape, by taking the methods they did:

and will not call back his words; his threatenings delivered by the prophets: these, as he does not repent of, he will not revoke or make void, but fulfil and accomplish; what he has said he will do, and what he has purposed he will bring to pass; and therefore it was a weak and an unwise part they acted, by applying to others, and slighting him:

but will arise against the house of evildoers; not the ten tribes of Israel, as Jarchi and Kimchi interpret it; but rather the people of the Jews, or some particular family among them; it may be the royal family, chiefly concerned in sending the embassy to Egypt, or in advising to it; though it may be the singular is put for the plural, as the Septuagint and Arabic versions render it “the houses”; and so may design all those great families which joined in this affair, and are therefore called “evildoers”; as all such are that put their confidence in the creature, and not in the Lord; and against such he will “arise”, in a hostile manner, sooner or later, against whom there is no standing; (see ^{1800*} Job 9:4):

and against the help of them that work iniquity; that is, against the Egyptians, the helpers of the Jews, who were workers of iniquity, and therefore their help and hope in it would be in vain; or else the latter part is descriptive of the Egyptians their helpers, who were a wicked and idolatrous nation, and so not to be sought unto for help, or trusted in, since, God being against them, it would be to no purpose, as he is against all workers of iniquity.

Ver. 3. *Now the Egyptians [are] men, and not God*, &c.] Be it that they are mighty, they are not mighty, as God is; and indeed they are but frail, feeble, mortal, and mutable men, and therefore not to be trusted in, and depended on; or to be put upon an equality with God, and even to be preferred to him, as they were by the Jews; and of what use and service could they be unto them, seeing God was against them?

and their horses flesh, and not spirit; only flesh, without an immortal soul or spirit, which man has; and therefore a foolish thing in man to trust in them, who must be entirely guided and directed by them; and much less angelic spirits, or like them, which are incorporeal, invisible, and exceedingly mighty and powerful, which excel all creatures in strength, and are called the mighty angels; these are God's cavalry, his horses and chariots; (see ^{<B87>}Psalm 68:17) (^{<318>}Habakkuk 3:8,15) and what mighty things have been done by them, even by a single one? Witness the destruction of the Assyrian army, in one night, by one of them; wherefore the Egyptian cavalry was not to be named with them^{f623}:

When the Lord shall stretch out his hand; as soon as he does it, before he strikes, and when he does this in order to it:

both he that helpeth shall fall; or "stumble", take a false step; meaning the Egyptians, sent for and come forth to help the Jews; but, stumbling and falling themselves, would be but poor assistants to them. Aben Ezra interprets this of the king of Assyria destroying the Egyptians, when he came to Jerusalem:

and he that is holpen shall fall down; the Jews, helped by the Egyptians, who should fall, and be destroyed, though not now; yet hereafter by the Chaldeans, as they were:

and they all shall fail together; both the Egyptians and the Jews.

Ver. 4. *For thus hath the Lord spoken unto me, &c.*] The prophet Isaiah, who had heard and received what follows from the Lord, and therefore it might be depended upon; and they are words of grace and mercy, promising preservation and deliverance; and therefore it was a foolish thing to send to Egypt for help:

Like as the lion, and the young lion roaring on his prey; or “muttering”, or “growling over his prey”^{f624}; for the lion roars when he is hungry, and wants a prey, and not when he has got one; but when he has one, and is tearing it in pieces, and feeding upon it, he makes a lower noise, a growling one, especially when he apprehends anyone near to disturb him:

when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him; or, “a fulness of shepherds”^{f625}; the whole posse of them, all that are in the towns and villages, or fields adjacent: who, when a lion has got a lamb or sheep out of the flock, are alarmed and called together, to deliver it, if possible, out of his hands; one not daring to venture, or being not sufficient to disturb him, or drive him away: or, “when a multitude of shepherds meet him”^{f626}; with the prey in his jaws; or rather “call to him”, make a noise, in hopes to frighten him, and cause him to drop his prey, that being all they can do, not daring to go near him; which sense is confirmed by what follows:

[he] will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them; he will not leave and lose his prey, or flee from it or them, for the yell and confused noise they make; nor move at all the faster for them, not being in the least intimidated by them:

so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion, and for the hill thereof; that is, he shall come down from heaven by his angel, or in the display of his mighty power, and fight against the Assyrian army, in favour of his people, the inhabitants of Zion or Jerusalem, and deliver them; and there will be no more withstanding him, or putting him off from his purpose, or preventing his good designs and resolutions, than the shepherds are able to divert a lion from his prey. The simile is expressive of the power of God, and of his certain accomplishment of his purposes and promises.

Ver. 5. *As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem, &c.*] As the preceding metaphor expresses the mighty power of God, this his tenderness and affection, as well as his speed and swiftness in the deliverance of his people. As birds in the air, at a distance, especially the

eagle, have their eye upon their nests, and their young ones in them, and when in danger fly to their assistance, and hover over them, and about them, to keep off those that would hurt them, or carry them away; so the Lord, on high, sees his people when in distress, and hastens to help them, and does surround, protect, and defend them: thus the Lord did, when Sennacherib with his army besieged Jerusalem; who boasted, with respect to other nations, that he had “found as a nest the riches of the people”, and that “there was none that moved the wing against him”, (~~2304~~ Isaiah 10:14) to which it is thought the allusion is here:

defending also he will deliver [it]; from present distress, the siege of the Assyrian army:

[and] passing over he will preserve [it]; passing over the city of Jerusalem to the army of the king of Assyria, that lay encamped against it; and smiting that by an angel with a sudden destruction, preserved the city from the ruin it was threatened with. The allusion is rightly thought to be to the Lord’s passing over the houses of the Israelites, when he destroyed the firstborn in Egypt, (~~4023~~ Exodus 12:23) where the same word is used as here, and nowhere else.

Ver. 6. *Turn ye unto [him], &c.*] From the Egyptians, to whom they sought for help, unto the Lord, they had neglected; from evil ways and practices, idolatry and impiety, by repentance and reformation; to the true worship of God, to his word and ordinances, statutes and commands. The Targum is,

“turn to the law;”

which they had rejected and broken. These are the words of the prophet, a call of his to the people to repentance, to which they might be induced by the gracious declaration of the Lord unto them, in the preceding verses, promising them preservation and safety:

[from] whom the children of Israel have deeply revolted: or, “made deep a revolt”^{f627}; had gone very far back from God, and deep into sin and ruin, that their recovery was difficult; and yet their return was absolutely necessary, which ought to be done both speedily and heartily. Some think reference is had to the deep schemes they had laid, those political ones, at least, which they thought were such, in applying to Egypt for help, when they, as it is said, (~~23915~~ Isaiah 29:15) sought “deep to hide their counsel front the Lord”; in doing which they deeply departed from him, and are here

called to return to him. This is said not of the ten tribes, that were gone into captivity, but of the Jews, who were the posterity of Israel also; which is mentioned, to put them in mind of their descent, as an aggravation of their sin, and as an argument for their return.

Ver. 7. *For in that day*, &c.] When deliverance shall be wrought; when men shall be convinced of the vanity and insufficiency of their idols to help them, and of their sin in worshipping them; when they shall be brought to repentance for it, and turn to the Lord as an evidence of it:

every man shall cast away his idols of silver, and his idols of gold; with contempt and abhorrence of them, as the word^{f628} signifies; every man “his” own idol, and even those that were of the greatest value, which were made of gold and silver:

which your own hands have made unto you [for] a sin; their idols were the work of their own hands, and were made by them in order to commit sin with, the sin of idolatry; or sin may be put for the punishment of sin, which is the issue and consequence of such practices: or it may be rendered, “which your hands of sin”, or “sinful hands, have made”^{f629}; it was a sin to make such idols, especially with a view to worship them; it was a sin to worship them; and the fruit of it was deserved punishment.

Ver. 8. *Then shall the Assyrian fall with the sword, not of a mighty man*, &c.] That is, the Assyrian army under Sennacherib their king, which besieged Jerusalem in Hezekiah’s time; which, as soon as the people were brought to a sense of their sin, and repentance for it, and cast away their idols as a proof of it, were utterly destroyed; but not in battle, not by the sword of Hezekiah, or any of his valiant generals:

and the sword, not of a mean man, shall devour him; neither the sword of a general, nor of a private soldier, nor indeed of any man, but of an angel; (see ~~1208~~2 Kings 19:35):

but he shall flee from the sword; from the drawn sword of the angel, who very probably appeared in such a form as in (~~1216~~1 Chronicles 21:16) which Sennacherib king of Assyria seeing, as well as the slaughter made in his army by him, fled from it; in the Hebrew text it is added, “for himself”^{f630}; he fled for his life, for his own personal security; (see ~~1208~~2 Kings 19:36):

and his young men shall be discomfited; his choice ones, the flower of his army: or “melt away”^{f631}, through fear; or die by the stroke of the angel upon them: the sense of becoming “tributary” seems to have no foundation.

Ver. 9. *And he shall pass over to his strong hold for fear*, &c.] This is said of the king of Assyria, departing in haste from the siege of Jerusalem, to some strong hold in his own country, particularly his strong city Nineveh, for fear of the angel, and destruction following him; nor could he think himself safe, until he had got there. Some render it (and the original will bear it), “and his rock shall pass over for fear”^{f632}; his mighty men, his men of valour, in whom he trusted, and put his confidence, who were his strength, on which he depended; these, as many as were left of them, fled away. So the Targum,

“his princes shall flee for fear;”

though these are expressed in the next clause:

and his princes shall be afraid of the ensign; any ensign or standard they saw, supposing it to be a detachment of the Jews in pursuit of them; or not daring afterwards to face any enemy with their banners displayed: or rather were terrified at the sight of the standard erected by the angel in the air, and at the slaughter of their companies under them in the camp:

saith the Lord, whose fire [is] in Zion, and his furnace in Jerusalem; who keeps house there, and therefore will defend it. Some, as Aben Ezra and others, think reference is had to the altar of the Lord, where the fire was kept continually burning, and sacrifices were offered up to him, and therefore being the place of his worship, he would take care of it; but rather it seems to denote the fire of God’s wrath, to defend his people, and destroy his enemies, (^{<80B>}Zechariah 2:5). The Targum is,

“whose lustre is in Zion to them that do the law, and a burning furnace of fire to them that transgress his word.”

The Jews, in their Talmud^{f633}, interpret the “fire” of hell, and the “furnace” of the gate of hell.