

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JUDGMENTS PAST AND FUTURE

THIS chapter introduces a new series of prophetic messages embracing chapters 28-33. This section is characterized by six woes, reminding us of those of chapter five. These, however, all have to do particularly with Israel and the surrounding nations in the last days, although the first one has already had a partial fulfillment in the judgment that fell upon Samaria when Shalmanezzer, King of Assyria, overthrew the northern kingdom in the year 721 B.C. But that judgment was a precursor of a greater disaster yet to fall upon the land to which Israel has now returned and has been recognized by the Gentile powers as an independent nation.

Verses 1-4 are complete in themselves and give us the reason for God's dealing with Ephraim, or Samaria, when He allowed the Assyrian to overrun the land, destroy the cities, and carry a vast number of the Israelites into captivity.

“Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine I Behold, the Lord hath a mighty and strong one, which as a tempest of hail and a destroying storm, as a flood of mighty waters overflowing, shall cast down to the earth with the hand. The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet: and the glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be a fading flower, and as the hasty fruit before the summer; which when he that looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up” (verses 1-4).

This gives a very vivid description of the luxurious conditions prevailing in Samaria before the captivity. Under Jeroboam II and the later kings of Israel, the city of Samaria had become a grand and glorious metropolis; built upon a high hill the sides of which were terraced and planted with delightful gardens and groves, it was perhaps the loveliest city in all Palestine. The valley below, reaching to the great plain of Esdraelon, or Jezreel, abounded in orchards, vineyards, and fruitful fields.

So richly had God Himself lavished His benefits upon the people of the entire region that in their enjoyment of His gifts they utterly forgot the Giver and turned to idolatry of the vilest kind; idolatry copied from the nations round about them.

With the worship of false gods they turned also to the ways of the heathen so that, reveling in luxury, they gave themselves to drunkenness and licentiousness until as a people they became so corrupt that God Himself could no longer tolerate them. Therefore, He caused the heart of the king of Assyria to look covetously upon this beautiful land and he came against it with a great army.

Israel, however, buoyed up by self-confidence and a groundless optimism, scorned the power of the invader, feeling secure in their own might. But when the test came, their armies were utterly defeated and the Assyrians everywhere were triumphant. Thus, Samaria becomes for us a warning concerning the folly of trusting in self rather than in the omnipotent power of God.

Had Israel been living for Him and worshiping Him they could have counted on Him to defend them against every foe, but He had long since declared, **“Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”** So it was at that time, and so it ever will be in days to come.

“In that day shall the Lord of hosts be for a crown of glory, and for a diadem of beauty, unto the residue of his people, and for a spirit of judgment to him that sitteth in judgment, and for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate. But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean. Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: for with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here I a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken” (verses 6-13).

For a moment the Lord directs the attention of His people to the coming day of His power; for the expression, **“In that day,”** as used in the prophetic Scriptures almost invariably refers to the time when He shall arise in judgment on His enemies and for the deliverance of the remnant who put their trust in Him. Immediately after this glimpse of the coming glory, the prophet goes back to call attention to the bewildered and confused state in which the people of Judah were found, and though they gloried in having the Temple of the Lord and in the fact that they remained faithful to the House of David, nevertheless, they were as far from God practically as their brethren of the north.

Drunkenness, in Scripture, is often used to illustrate or represent the effects of spiritual intoxication brought about by refusing obedience to the Word of the Lord and giving heed to false teaching.

Although God had so patiently dealt with His people, sending those to them who could teach them the way of righteousness, endeavoring to instruct them as one deals with little children, giving them “**precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little,**” as they were able to bear it, yet they had not profited by such careful teaching but had turned away from the truth and like many today accepted in its place the traditions of men. Therefore, judgment long delayed must at last fall upon them.

They will still be taught by precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; but it will be in order to prepare them for the doom that awaits all those who forsake the living God and walk in their own self-chosen paths.

In the day of the great tribulation, the time of Jacob’s trouble, the apostate part of the nation will know the reality of this to the full, but in that day the Lord will deliver the faithful remnant who refused to obey the behest of the Beast and the Antichrist, and chose instead the path of obedience to the Word of God.

Because Judah refused to hear this Word, God was about to teach them the folly of departure from Himself by sending against them the armies of their enemies; men who spoke languages with which the Hebrews were not familiar. In this way He would teach them by men of stammering lips and of other tongues. In the New Testament, however, the Apostle Peter quotes this verse but applies it to the miraculous gift of tongues when, as on the day of Pentecost, the disciples proclaimed the Gospel in so many different languages. Thus with men of other tongues did He deliver the message of grace.

We need not think for a moment that there was any misapplication of this passage. In its primary meaning it clearly refers to the men of the nations who were to come against Judah and teach them by disaster what they would not learn in times of peace, but in this gospel dispensation the Spirit of God Himself takes up this passage and applies it as indicated.

God, who delights in mercy, deigned to use this method in order to give men the gospel in the quickest possible way. People today talk of the gift of tongues and many profess to possess it, and we are told distinctly in Scripture that we are not to forbid speaking in tongues. But where are there any who can preach the Gospel in a language they have never learned? Should such miraculous instances occur surely no right-minded Christian would object; but where it is just a matter of uttering unmeaning gibberish we may be confident that it is not the Spirit of God who is operating in such instances.

Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves” (verses 14, 15).

In their immediate application, these words referred undoubtedly to the attempt of Judah to form an alliance with Assyria or with Egypt in order to protect them against one or the other of these two powers.

Though they thought that they had made sure covenants, first with the one and then with the other of these nations, and they attempted to rest content with the assurance that they would thus be preserved from destruction, they were soon to find that their optimism was ill founded.

That the passage has an application to the future, surely no instructed student of prophecy can question, for in the last days a covenant will be made between the “**willful king**” in Jerusalem, the head of the Jewish State at that time, and the “**Beast**,” the head of the ten-kingdomed empire pictured by the ten toes on the feet of the image in Daniel 2, and the ten horns on the last beast in Daniel 7, as also the ten horns on the Beast in Revelation 13, and again in chapter 17.

This covenant will be made for seven years as we are told in Daniel 9:27, but in the midst of the week, that is, at the end of three-and-a-half years, the covenant will be broken. It is this that is described as a covenant with death and with hell. It will be the effort of the nation of Israel, returned to the Land in unbelief, to ensure protection from their foes in the east and the north, who will be looking with covetous eyes upon Palestine and its increasing wealth. They will find however that by looking to man instead of to the Lord Himself, they will fail to maintain the peace and security which they hoped thus to safeguard. Only in the Messiah whom they once rejected can lasting blessing be found. Of this the following verses speak:

“Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place” (verses 16, 17).

We know from I Peter 2:6 that the Stone here referred to is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He had come to Israel in lowly grace only to be rejected, but as Psalm 118:22 tells us, “**The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner.**” All blessing for Israel and Judah, as well as for the Gentile world, is bound up with Him. To refuse God’s testimony regarding His Son is to deliberately choose everlasting judgment. To receive Him means everlasting life and blessing.

Alas, that Israel has been blinded for, so long, and that because of their failure to receive their King when He came in grace they have had to endure such incredible sufferings throughout the long centuries of their wanderings, and even after they return to their land they still have greater sufferings in store for them until at last they look upon Him whom they have pierced and mourn for Him as one mourneth for his only son (Zechariah 12:10).

When that day of trouble comes, those who refuse allegiance to the Beast and the Antichrist will wait in faith for the manifestation of this Living Stone which is to fall upon the feet of the great image of Gentile supremacy, grinding it to powder. It will be their portion to wait quietly, realizing the truth that he that believeth shall not make haste. God’s plan will be fulfilled in His own time. Then righteousness and judgment will prevail and the refuge of lies will be utterly swept away.

“And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it. From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night: and it shall be a vexation only to understand the report” (verses 18, 19).

The Lord’s appearing will destroy the refuge of lies and annul the covenant with death and the agreement with hell. Condign judgment will be the portion of all those who accept the mark of the Beast and the number of his name, but those who put their trust in the Lord will be vindicated and given their place in the coming glorious kingdom of God when set up on earth in visible power.

Until that day, those who turn away from the Lord will trust in their own plans for deliverance and will find themselves like the uncomfortable sleeper described in the next verse:

“For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it. For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act. Now, therefore be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong: for I have heard from the Lord God of hosts a consumption, even determined upon the whole earth” (verses 20-22).

As of old when God led His people through the wilderness to the land of promise, delivering them from their enemies by the manifestation of His own power and enabling them to overcome, though themselves weak compared with their foes, so in the coming day will He deliver the remnant of His people from all those that shall rise up against Him and pour out His judgment upon all those that despise His name. He has no delight in this. His heart goes out to all men everywhere. He desires that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that all should turn unto Him and live, but if men refuse His mercy and spurn His loving-kindness, then in righteousness He must deal with them in judgment.

Judgment is His strange work, His strange act. He would far rather show mercy and save than condemn and punish. He respects the sanctity of the human will and if men will not turn to Him to find life, then they themselves deliberately choose death whether they realize it or not.

“Give ye ear, and hear my voice; hearken, and hear my speech. Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rye in their place? For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him. For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. This also cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working” (verses 23-29).

Precious and important lessons are here drawn from the cultivation of herbs and cereals.

First, the ground must be well prepared by plowing and then the soil further broken up by harrowing; after that the seed is cast in; and then when the herbs or grains are ready for harvest each one is dealt with in accordance with its own nature. So God seeks to break up the hard soil of man's opposition to Himself by the plowshare of His truth, and by careful instruction as to the way of life.

If, when the seed has been cast into the ground of a good and honest heart, it brings forth abundantly, He has different methods of dealing with those who have responded to His truth according as they are able to bear. He does not deal with all in the same way, even as the careful farmer does not thresh the softer herbs in the way that he deals with the harder grains. Those who go forth in the name of the Lord, sowing the seed, need to have these principles in mind in order that they may deal wisely with those whom they endeavor to help.

~ end of chapter 28 ~

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