

Isaiah 17:1-18:7 “We Have a City vs. Damascus” January 31, 2021

Even as we walk through the oracles against the nations,
we keep seeing Zion over and over.

14:32 – “The LORD has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge.”

16:1 – “Send the lamb to the ruler of the land, from Sela, by way of the desert,
to the mount of the daughter of Zion”

And now 18:7 – where tribute is brought “to Mt Zion,
the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.”

In other words, Zion is taking center stage here in the midst of the nations.

This is why I have suggested that the theme of this section of Isaiah is
“we have a strong city.”

Isaiah 13-27 forms the second major section of the book of Isaiah.
Chapters 13-23 will consist of oracles against the nations –
showing how the cities of man do not last – *cannot* last.

The LORD is indeed the sovereign God of history,
who governs all things according to the counsel of his holy will.

And in these chapters 13-27 God explains his purposes for the nations.
Zion is at the center of God’s purposes for the whole earth.

Chapters 13-23 set forth ten oracles concerning the nations.
Last time we hear the oracle against Moab.

Oracle	
Babylon	13:1-14:27
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The Year that King Ahaz died	14:28-32
Moab	15:1-16:14
Damascus	17:1-18:7
Egypt	19:1-25

Chapter 20 consists of a *sign* given in the middle of the ten oracles (five on either side).

wilderness of the sea	21:1-10
Dumah	21:11-12
Arabia	21:13-17
valley of vision	22:1-25
Tyre	23:1-18

These are all the nations involved in the middle eastern conflict of the late 8th-century.

Tonight we look especially at the oracle concerning Damascus.

Some commentators divide this into two oracles –
with chapter 18 being a separate oracle –
but as we go through, we will see that Isaiah sets this up as *one*.

Now it's true that this *one* oracle includes both Damascus and Cush.

Damascus was the capital city of Syria,
once the main enemy of the northern kingdom of Israel.
But after the rise of Assyria,
Damascus and Samaria unite against the menace of the east.

Cush is the region below Egypt—probably as far south as Ethiopia and Eritrea.
Moses had married a Cushite, and the Queen of Sheba came from that area
and to this day there is a small Jewish population in Eritrea of African Jews.

In the 8th century the Cushites had conquered Egypt,
so Piye, the King of Cush (modern Sudan), was now the ruler of Egypt,
and in 715 (the year that King Ahaz died)
he promised all the Palestinian states his aid against Assyria.

So even though you might think that Cush and Damascus are far apart,
they were a lot closer together, due to their common hostility to Assyria!

But we start with Damascus!

1. Damascus Will Become a Heap of Ruins like Israel (v1-3)

An oracle concerning Damascus.

*Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city
and will become a heap of ruins.*

² *The cities of Aroer are deserted;
they will be for flocks,
which will lie down, and none will make them afraid.*

³ *The fortress will disappear from Ephraim,
and the kingdom from Damascus;
and the remnant of Syria will be
like the glory of the children of Israel,
declares the LORD of hosts.*

How is this oracle “concerning Damascus”?

The key is found in the first three verses.

Damascus is compared with Ephraim.
Damascus will become a heap of ruins.
Just as Ephraim's fortresses will disappear,
so also the kingdom will disappear from Damascus,
“and the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel.”

In Isaiah's day, Damascus was the capital of Syria.
Damascus was at the crossroads of two major trade routes.
The King's Highway –
(the way of the desert that we talked about last time) –
which was the major north-south trading route between Egypt and Asia –
and the east-west desert route that connected Tyre and Sidon with Babylon.

The Arameans had established several kingdoms in the region,
and Damascus quickly became an important center.
King David had stationed a garrison in Damascus during his reign –
which fits well with what we know of the period.
Shortly after the time of Solomon, the Syrians united under Ben-Hadad I
and began regular incursions into Israel.

In the 9th and 8th centuries, there was regular conflict between Damascus and Samaria,
(the capital of Israel)

During the ministry of Elijah and Elisha,
we hear of the invasions by Ben-Hadad I –
and Elijah, at one point, is told to go to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king
(a task that Elisha fulfills).

But as we saw in chapter 7,
as Assyria grew stronger and stronger,
the former foes were pushed together into the alliance
that Isaiah warns Ahaz against in chapters 7ff.

This is why Syria's fate is tied to Israel's.
And we see how in verses 4-11.

2. Three “In That Days” (v4-11)

a. The Glory of Jacob Brought Low (v4-6)

⁴ *And in that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low,
and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.*

⁵ *And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain
and his arm harvests the ears,
and as when one gleanes the ears of grain
in the Valley of Rephaim.*

⁶ *Gleanings will be left in it,
as when an olive tree is beaten—
two or three berries
in the top of the highest bough,
four or five
on the branches of a fruit tree,
declares the LORD God of Israel.*

There are three “in that days” in verses 4, 7, and 9.

This is the “Day of the LORD.”

The day of the LORD refers to the day when God comes to makes things right.

First, in verses 4-6 the glory of Jacob will be brought low.

Israel has glorified himself – he has not glorified God.

And so the glory of Jacob will be brought low.

The harvest will be destroyed—only gleanings will be left.

b. Man Will Look to His Maker and Look Away from Idols (v7-8)

⁷ *In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel.* ⁸ *He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense.*

And so, secondly, in that day, man (*ha adam*) will look to his Maker –
this reminds us that man (*ha adam*) was made in the image of God –
and when *ha adam* looks to his Maker,
“his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel.”

Think about what this means here in an oracle concerning Damascus!

All the nations have their own creation stories.

They all claim that they were created by their own gods.

But in *that day* – in the Day of the LORD – in the day of judgment –

man (humanity) will look to his maker and see the Holy One of Israel!

He won't look to the altars – the work of his hands –

he will not look on what his own fingers have made –

no, he will look on the Holy One of Israel.

Israel's god is truly the God of all nations!

c. Strong Cities Will be Deserted (v9-11)

⁹ *In that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the*

hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.

¹⁰ *For you have forgotten the God of your salvation
and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge;*

therefore, though you plant pleasant plants

and sow the vine-branch of a stranger,

¹¹ *though you make them grow^[a] on the day that you plant them,
and make them blossom in the morning that you sow,*

yet the harvest will flee away^[b]

in a day of grief and incurable pain.

And finally, in verses 9-11, the strong cities are deserted and desolate in that day.

Why?

“Because you have forgotten the God of your salvation
and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge”

They planted pleasant plants – they cultivated close relations with Damascus.

They became close allies with those who hated God –
and tied their fortunes to Damascus.

Therefore, because they preferred the fellowship of idols to the Rock of their refuge,
therefore the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain.

We live in a day when it is very easy to ally ourselves with forces that are hostile to Jesus.

Some think that in order to gain cultural acceptance,
we should ally with the left.

Others think that in order to stave off the onslaught of liberalism,
we should ally with the neo-pagans on the right.

Isaiah says that if you go down either path –
you are forgetting the God of your salvation!

Either path will give you a temporary harvest –
but it will prove to be a fleeting harvest –
that will end in a day of grief and incurable pain.

God’s judgment is coming.

In the face of the hordes of the Assyrian army,
that was hard to remember.

And that is what we see in verses 12-14:

3. Two “Oi’s” (v12-18:7)

a. The Thundering of the Nations Will Come to Naught (17:12-14)

17:12-14 and 18:1-7 conclude this section with two woes

The first speaks to Damascus and Samaria.

Verses 12-14 set forth the picture of the seas flooding the land (read).

¹² *Ah, the thunder of many peoples;
they thunder like the thundering of the sea!
Ah, the roar of nations;
they roar like the roaring of mighty waters!*
¹³ *The nations roar like the roaring of many waters,
but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away,
chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind
and whirling dust before the storm.*
¹⁴ *At evening time, behold, terror!
Before morning, they are no more!
This is the portion of those who loot us,
and the lot of those who plunder us.*

The nations are like a mighty flood –
like the thundering of the sea!

Have you ever sat by the ocean?
Quite frankly, Lake Michigan has quite sufficient waves!
You can sit and listen for hours to the never-ending roaring of mighty waters!
Never-ending, and yet ever-changing.

The thundering of the sea – the mighty breakers crashing on the rocks!

That's what the Assyrian army will be like.
A never-ending tide of warriors crashing on the mountains!

But God will rebuke the flood,
and the nations will be driven away.
Here Isaiah changes the image, and says they will be
“chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind.”

At evening time, behold, terror!
Before morning, they are no more!

Do you trust God?

b. Go to Ethiopia and See that the LORD Rules All Nations (18:1-7)
Many commentators think that chapter 18 is a separate oracle against Cush –
but I'm going to follow the text as we have it –
which includes chapter 18 as a part of the oracle concerning Damascus.

(In the same way that Assyria was included in the oracle concerning Babylon)

My reason for this is particularly found
in the connection between the opening word of v12 (“Ah”)
and 18:1 (“Ah”)

Isaiah wants you to connect these – and not think of them as two different oracles.

At first it sounds like it is talking about something a world away –
after all, Cush is far to the south – modern day Sudan or Ethiopia.

*18 Ah, land of whirring wings
that is beyond the rivers of Cush,^[c]
² which sends ambassadors by the sea,
in vessels of papyrus on the waters!*

But then Isaiah turns to the far off land beyond the rivers of Cush (18:1-7)
–the land of whirring wings.

They have offered their aid to overthrow Assyria.
Will you put your trust in the far off land of Cush?

Cush had conquered Egypt –
so if anyone had the power to defeat Assyria,
it would be Cush!

Damascus has failed – but maybe Cush can help!

And so Isaiah says:

*Go, you swift messengers,
to a nation tall and smooth,
to a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide.*

In Cush the Nile divides into two branches.

Would this fearsome nation be able to rescue Jerusalem? (or Damascus?)

Send your messengers far up the Nile!

Or wait – don’t bother! –
save your time and energy.

³ *All you inhabitants of the world,
you who dwell on the earth,
when a signal is raised on the mountains, look!*

When a trumpet is blown, hear!
⁴ *For thus the LORD said to me:*
“I will quietly look from my dwelling
like clear heat in sunshine,
like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.”
⁵ *For before the harvest, when the blossom is over,*
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,
he cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks,
and the spreading branches he lops off and clears away.

God is a vinedresser who knows what he is doing.
And all of this excitement about Cush will come to nothing.

⁶ *They shall all of them be left*
to the birds of prey of the mountains
and to the beasts of the earth.
And the birds of prey will summer on them,
and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them.

As it will happen to Damascus – so also to Cush –
and so also to all those who trust in them!

So don't bother sending messengers with tribute to Cush –
because

⁷ *At that time tribute will be brought to the LORD of hosts*
from a people tall and smooth,
from a people feared near and far,
a nation mighty and conquering,
whose land the rivers divide,
to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.

Damascus would become the city where Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus.
And for centuries Damascus remained a center of early Christianity.

Likewise the Ethiopian eunuch would be converted under the preaching of Philip,
and he would take the gospel back to Ethiopia –
and for centuries Ethiopia would remain faithful to the gospel!

And thus both nations would bring tribute to Mount Zion,
the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.

Think about what this means.

The powers that you are tempted to trust will fail you.

But God isn't finished with them.

If you trust in the powers of this age,
they will collapse – and you will fall.

But God's purpose is to bring these powers into subjection to him.

When he destroys them, he will do so in a way that results in their conversion!

Just like Saul on the road to Damascus...

just like the Ethiopian eunuch...

Back in chapter 2, Isaiah had said,

*It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,*

and shall be lifted up above the hills;

and all the nations shall flow to it,

³ *and many peoples shall come, and say:*

*“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,*

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,^[a]

and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ *He shall judge between the nations,*

and shall decide disputes for many peoples;

and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,

and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war anymore.

Obviously, that hasn't *fully* taken place yet!

We do not yet see everything under Jesus' feet.

But we see Jesus.