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# Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XIV : THE COMING DESTRUCTION OF SYRIA AND ISRAEL (17:1-14)

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General outline (from Young's *Isaiah*):

- I. The Crisis and the Messiah (1:1-12:6)
  - A. Introduction to the Entire Prophecy (1:1-31)
  - B. Early Messages of Isaiah (2:1-5:30)
  - C. Judah's True Hope: The Messianic King (6:1-12:6)
- II. The Theocracy and the Nations (13:1-39:8)
  - A. Judah and the World Power (13:1-27:13)
    - 1. The Growth of the Mesopotamia Power (13:1-14:32)
    - 2. The Downfall of Moab, Syria, and Other Nations (15:1-18:7)
      - a. The Oracle of Moab (15:1-9)
      - b. Moab's Suffering (16:1-14)
      - c. Judgement Over Syria (17:1-14)
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## ***c. Judgement Over Syria (17:1-14)***

*An oracle concerning Damascus: "See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins. The cities of Aroer will be deserted and left to flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid. The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the Israelites," declares the LORD Almighty. "In that day the glory of Jacob will fade; the fat of his body will waste away. It will be as when a reaper gathers the standing grain and harvests the grain with his arm — as when a man glean heads of grain in the Valley*

*The burden of Damascus. Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap. The cities of Aroer are forsaken: they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make them afraid. The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria: they shall be as the glory of the children of Israel, saith the LORD of hosts. And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin, and the fatness of his flesh shall wax lean. And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; and it shall be as he that*

*The burden of Damascus. Lo, Damascus is taken away from [being] a city, And it hath been a heap — a ruin. Forsaken are the cities of Aroer, For droves they are, and they have lain down, And there is none troubling. And ceased hath the fortress from Ephraim, And the kingdom from Damascus, And the remnant of Aram are as the honour of the sons of Israel, The affirmation of Jehovah of Hosts! And it hath come to pass, in that day, Wax poor doth the honour of Jacob, And the fatness of his flesh doth wax lean. And it hath come to pass, As the gathering by the reaper of the standing corn, And his arm the ears reapeth, And it hath come to*

of Rephaim. Yet some gleanings will remain, as when an olive tree is beaten, leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches, four or five on the fruitful boughs," declares the LORD, the God of Israel. In that day men will look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel. They will not look to the altars, the work of their hands, and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles and the incense altars their fingers have made. In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation. You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress. Therefore, though you set out the finest plants and plant imported vines, though on the day you set them out, you make them grow, and on the morning when you plant them, you bring them to bud, yet the harvest will be as nothing in the day of disease and incurable pain. Oh, the raging of many nations — they rage like the raging sea! Oh, the uproar of the peoples — they roar like the roaring of great waters! Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters, when he rebukes them they flee far away, driven before the wind like chaff on the hills, like tumbleweed before a gale. In

gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim. Yet gleanings shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the LORD God of Israel. At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel. And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made, either the groves, or the images. In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough, and an uppermost branch, which they left because of the children of Israel: and there shall be desolation. Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow. Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, that make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but God shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the

pass, As the gathering of the ears in the valley of Rephaim, And left in him have been gleanings, As the compassing of an olive, Two — three berries on the top of a branch, Four — five on the fruitful boughs, The affirmation of Jehovah, God of Israel! In that day doth man look to His Maker, Yea, his eyes to the Holy One of Israel look, And he looketh not unto the altars. The work of his own hands, And that which his own fingers made He seeth not — the shrines and the images. In that day are the cities of his strength As the forsaken thing of the forest, And the branch that they have left, Because of the sons of Israel, It also hath been a desolation. Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, And the rock of thy strength hast not remembered, Therefore thou plantest plants of pleasantness, And with a strange slip sowest it, In the day thy plant thou causest to become great, And in the morning thy seed makest to flourish, A heap [is] the harvest in a day of overflowing, And of mortal pain. Wo [to] the multitude of many peoples, As the sounding of seas they sound; And [to] the wasting of nations, As the wasting of mighty waters they are wasted. Nations as the wasting of many waters are wasted, And He hath pushed against it, And it hath fled afar off, And been pursued as chaff of hills before wind, And as a rolling thing before a

*the evening, sudden terror! whirlwind. And behold at hurricane. At even-time, lo, Before the morning, they are eveningtide trouble; and before terror, before morning it is gone! This is the portion of the morning he is not. This is not, This [is] the portion of our those who loot us, the lot of the portion of them that spoil spoilers, And the lot of our those who plunder us. (NIV) us, and the lot of them that rob plunderers! (YLT) us. (KJV)*

## PROPHECY GIVEN TO THE ALLIED NATIONS OF SYRIA AND NORTHERN ISRAEL

— “The heading of this chapter certainly seems to apply to the whole of it; yet there is much in it that relates to Israel rather than to Syria and its capital city, Damascus. This need cause no real problems, for Isaiah 7-8 deals with the Syro-Ephraimite threat to Judah. *If two nations are locked together in an alliance and have, at least temporarily, common political and military goals, it is understandable that they should together furnish the subject for an oracle. Ephraim’s devotion to the apostate shrines at Bethel and Dan had made her a perpetual rebel against the Lord, but now she became unequally yoked with a pagan nation in an endeavor to coerce Judah into an unholy league against Assyria....* The oracle opens with a call to visualize what God would make of a once-proud city (v. 1; cf. 5:7; 25:2). The downfall of Damascus would not be an isolated event, for other cities too would be deserted (v. 2). The double conjunction of Ephraim and Damascus and of Aram and the Israelites is striking (v. 3). *Israel has chosen to accept a close link with Damascus; so she had to accept the consequences of that relationship. A shared purpose involves a shared judgment.*” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROPHECY — When?** — While the exact time that this prophecy was given is unknown, all commentators assign it to the same general time-frame. Grogan gives the approximate dates as 735-732 BC. “There can be little doubt that it was when the alliance existed between Damascus and the kingdom of Ephraim, or Samaria, for on no other supposition can it be accounted for, that the two kingdoms were united in the prophecy.... The kingdom of Syria, or Damascus, was overthrown in the fourth year of the reign of Ahaz. It is clear, therefore, that the prophecy was delivered before that time.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*] **What?** — “The prophecy may be regarded as consisting of three parts. (1) The prediction of the divine judgment against Damascus (17:1,2). (2) The prediction respecting Ephraim, the ally of Damascus, and its fulfillment (17:3-11). (3) A prediction respecting the Assyrians, and the calamities that should come upon them as a nation (17:12-14).”

[Barnes, *Notes on OT*] **The Fulfillment** — Most commentators agree this is fulfilled when the alliance of Israel / Syria (Aram) was taken captive by Tiglath-peleser (2 Kings 16:9). It should be noted Isaiah does not say the city was to be destroyed and never inhabited as Babylon; rather that the city would be broken. It recovered from its calamities and may be traced through history. **Why?** — At least one of the reasons for this prophecy is encouragement and assurance to the people of God that Judah would be safe. Another purpose might have been further warning against Judah joining the alliance rather than trusting the Lord.



Modern-day Damascus

**DAMASCUS** — “Damascus was a celebrated city of Syria, and was long the capital of the kingdom of Damascus. It was a city in the time of Abraham, for the steward in his house, Eliezer, was said to be of Damascus (Gen 15:2)... From the time of Abraham until David, the Scripture says nothing of Damascus. In his time it was subdued, and brought under his authority. Toward the end of the reign of Solomon, the authority of the Jews was cast off by Rezin, and Damascus became again independent. Jeroboam, king of Israel, again conquered Damascus, and brought Syria into subjection (2 Kings 14:25); but after his death the Syrians again established their independence. Rezin became king of Damascus, and entered into an alliance with Pekah, king of Israel, and, unitedly, they invaded Judah, and made great havoc in its territories. Tiglath-pileser, however, king of Assyria, came to the assistance of the king of Judah and took Damascus, and destroyed it, and killed Rezin, and carried the Syrians into captivity beyond the Euphrates. To this event, probably, Isaiah refers in the prophecy before us.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

**THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ALLIED POWERS** — “The ‘cities of Aroer’ represent the land to the east of the Jordan: there the judgment upon Israel (executed by Tiglath-pileser) first began. There were two Aroers: an old Amoritish city allotted to the tribe of Reuben, viz., ‘Aroer on the Arnon’ (Deut 2:36; 3:12, etc.); and an old Ammonitish one, allotted to the tribe of Gad, viz., ‘Aroer before Rabbah’ (Josh 13:25).” [K&D, *Isaiah*] “*The fortress (v3):* The strong place of defense; the fortified place. *Shall cease:* Shall come to an end; shall cease to be.... *From Ephraim:* The name given to the kingdom of Israel ... Ephraim, or the kingdom of Samaria, is mentioned here in connection with Damascus or Syria, because they were confederated together, and would be involved in the same overthrow.... *And the remnant of Syria:* That which is left of the kingdom of Syria after the capital Damascus shall be destroyed.... *They shall be as the glory of the children of Israel:* That is, as the defenses, or the strongly fortified towns and fastnesses of the kingdom of Israel shall pass away or be destroyed, so shall it be with the kingdom of Damascus. As they are allied with each other, they shall fare alike. The Chaldee reads this, ‘And the dominion shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus.’ ” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

**THE LAND DESOLATED WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE “REMNANT”** — “The judgment on Ephraim was to be a devastating one, leaving the people decimated, a remnant so weak and small as apparently to be of no account. The ‘glory of Jacob’ (v.4) suggests Ephraim’s honor, the respect in which others would hold him. He would become subject to a wasting disease, making him perhaps as sorry a sight as if he had been subject to a terrible beating (cf. 1:54; 52:14). Just as in 1:5-9 the picture of a body politic suffering the consequences of sin gives place to one drawn from the harvest, so it is here (v.5), though the wonderful Spirit-controlled imagination of the prophet developed it in a somewhat different way in this context. First he thought in terms of the grain harvest. The reaper’s arm encircles and makes taut many stalks of grain so that he can remove their heads by one sweep of his sickle. Fruit trees also will be climbed as far as possible and beaten to gather the great bulk of their fruit (v.6). In each case the farmer endeavors to leave as little as possible for the gleaners, who are allowed by law to gather anything edible that had been missed (Deut 24:19-22). So thorough would judgment be, and yet the destruction would not be total. The phrases ‘the glory of Jacob’ and ‘the God of Israel’ at the beginning and the end of this section constitute a reminder that the God of the patriarchal promises has an ongoing purpose beyond temporal judgment (cf. 6:11-13).... Judgment (v10,11) can be pictured as a thorough harvest that leaves only scattered gleanings, but it can also be pictured as disappointing in itself; for even the finest plants, which the grower has searched out in foreign lands and planted in ideal conditions, may come to nothing. Some kind of pestilence is the implied figure of judgment here.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

**ISRAEL'S REPENTANCE AND CONVERSION** — “*At that day shall a man look to his Maker* (v7): Instead of confiding in their strongly fortified places and armies, they shall look for aid and protection to the God that made them, and who alone can help them. ***National afflictions and judgments often have the effect to turn the eyes of even a wicked and rebellious people to God. They feel their danger; they are convinced of their guilt; they see that no one but God can protect them; and for a time they are willing, even by humiliation and fasting, to seek the divine protection....*** *The Holy One of Israel:* The God of Israel; the true God. As the Syrians were allied with the kingdom of Samaria or Ephraim, they were, of course, acquainted with the true God, and in some sense acknowledged him. In these times of impending calamity, they would be led to seek him, and implore his aid and protection. There is no reason to believe, however, that they would turn permanently to him, or become his true worshipers.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

**TRUE REPENTANCE INVOLVES FORSAKING SINFUL ACTIVITIES** — Isaiah speaks of what we would say today: “*one cannot hold onto Christ with one hand and the world with the other.*” “*And he shall not look to the altars* (v8): That is, the altars of the gods which the Syrians worshiped, and the altars of the false gods which had been erected in the land of Israel or Samaria by its wicked kings, and particularly by Ahaz.... It is well known that the kings of Israel and Judah often reared altars to false gods in the high places and the groves of the land (see 2 Kings 21:3,4,5). The Ephraimites were particularly guilty in this respect (Hosea 8:11): ‘*Because Ephraim hath made many altars to sin, altars shall be unto him to sin.*’ .... *Either the groves:* The altars of idols were usually erected in groves, and idols were worshiped there before temples were raised (see Ex 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; Judg 3:7; 1 Kings 14:23; 18:19; 2 Chron 33:3). *Or the images:* Margin, ‘Sun images’. This word is used to denote idols in general in Lev 26:30; 2 Chron 24:4. But it is supposed to denote properly images erected to the sun, and to be derived from the sun. Thus the word is used in Job 30:28; Isa 24:23; 30:26; Song of Sol 6:10. The word, according to Gesenius, is of Persian origin. The sun was undoubtedly worshiped by the ancient idolaters, and altars or images would be erected to it.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*] ***Scripture repeatedly makes the difference between true Godly sorrow for sins and sorrow for getting caught! Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*** (2 Cor 7:10 NIV). True godly repentance is not seen much in this day of blaming others. ***True repentance involves an admission of guilt and an acceptance of the consequences.*** A scriptural example of true repentance might be seen in Joseph’s wise actions with his brothers. Not only had Joseph’s brothers selfishly sold him as a slave, they stood their ground while their father believed Joseph died, their hearts hard as Jacob wept. Years later in Pharaoh’s court Joseph wanted to see if that selfishness was still there or had they repented? They could have left their brother in Egypt as a slave and broken their father’s heart once again, yet they chose to do right. They had indeed repented from their past deeds. Scriptural examples of false repentance might be seen in the following:

- Achan “confessed his sin” and “repented” — but why did he have to be backed into a corner prior to confessing? (Josh 7:13-26) The Lord gave him an entire day to repent and confess, yet he hid his sin until the Lord brought it to light. It cost him his life and the life of his family.
- Pharaoh repeatedly confessed to Moses that he had sinned, yet when the pressure was off returned to his former ways. No true repentance; only a sorrow for having to pay for his sins.
- Saul “repented” to Samuel when caught in sin when he did not destroy the Amalekites as

the Lord had commanded (1 Sam 15). After his denial to Samuel that he had actually obeyed the Lord didn't work, Saul "confessed": *"Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned. I violated the LORD's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD.'" (1 Sam 15:24,25 NIV).* When Samuel refused and turned to walk away, Saul in frustration grabbed at Samuel and tore his robe. *"Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors — to one better than you.'" (1 Sam 15:28 NIV).* The problem? — Saul had not truly repented, he was only sorrowful that once again he had been caught in sin. His words said one thing, his actions said another.

***The overriding principle throughout scripture is this: true repentance brings the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord; false repentance or "sorrow for getting caught" brings the judgement of God upon the sin.*** The difficulty in all this is the Lord can see the heart but we cannot. *How can we know if repentance is true? One principle I have learned from experience is to not immediately take someone at his word; rather take the "hard" approach and see how the person responds. If the repentance is true, there will accompany it the acceptance of responsibility and any punishment that might be involved.* If a person "confesses" yet has another person or set of circumstances to blame, the repentance is probably not genuine. If the person "repents" yet balks at punishment, the repentance is again probably not genuine. ***True repentance involves not just the admission of the sin but a broken, contrite heart.*** One who accepts responsibility for his actions, truly realizes he has violated the laws of God and is guilty before the Lord, will accept any response to his sin. It always bothers me to see "repentance" yet sense a defiant, blame-casting attitude. That is evidence of "worldly sorrow which bringeth forth death."

**THE REASON FOR JUDGEMENT: FORGETTING GOD! —** *"The reason why the fate of Ephraim's fortified castles was the same as that of the Amoritish castles, which were then lying in ruins, was that Ephraim, as stated in v. 10, had turned away from its true rocky stronghold, namely from Jehovah. It was a consequence of this estrangement from God, that Ephraim planted plantations of the nature of pleasant things, or pleasant plantations, i.e., cultivated all kinds of sensual accompaniments to its worship, in accordance with its heathen propensities; and sowed, or rather 'set,' this garden-ground ... with strange grapes, by forming an alliance with a stranger, namely the king of Damascus.* On the very day of the planting, Ephraim fenced it carefully, that is to say, he ensured the perpetuity of these sensuous modes of worship as a state religion, with all the shrewdness of a Jeroboam (see Amos 7:13). And the very next morning he had brought into blossom what he had sown: the foreign layer had shot up like a hot-house plant, i.e., the alliance had speedily grown into a hearty agreement, and had already produced one blossom at any rate, viz., the plan of a joint attack upon Judah. But this plantation, which was so flattering and promising for Israel, and which had succeeded so rapidly, and to all appearance so happily, was a harvest heap for the day of the judgment." [K&D, Isaiah]

**AFTER THE LORD IS FINISHED WITH HIS "TOOL", HE WILL REBUKE THE ASSYRIANS (17:12-14) —** We saw in Isaiah 10:5-19 that the Lord sovereignly used Assyria to bring forth judgement on Syria, the northern kingdom of Israel, and then upon Judah. But the Lord promised deliverance to Jerusalem and judgement upon the Assyrians for their imperialistic actions. That message is repeated here. **The Coming Great Army —** *"The multitude of many people: Or, the tumult of many nations — a description of the noise attending an invading army made up of many nations mingled together, such as was that of Sennacherib. Which make a noise*

... This is a beautiful description of a vast army, and of the shouting, the tumult, the din, which attends its march. The same comparison occurs in Jer 6:23; Ps 65:7 (see Ez 43:2; Rev 1:15; 14:2; 19:6). *And to the rushing of nations*: The rushing of mighty armies to conquest.” **The Rebuke of God** — *God shall rebuke them*: ... The word ‘rebuke’ means that he would disarrange their plans, prevent their success, and defeat their purposes. It shows the great power of God, that he can thus by a rebuke — a word — arrest mighty nations, and discomfit them when they are tumultuously hastening onward in the confidence of victory. This discomfiture refers, doubtless, to the overthrow of Sennacherib and his army by the pestilence (2 Kings 19:35). *And they shall flee far off*: The whole army of Sennacherib was not destroyed, but a part with himself returned to Assyria (2 Kings 19:36). *And shall be chased as the chaff*: ... Denoting the case with which God would do it, and the certain and entire discomfiture of the army. The figure is one that is very striking in describing an army that is routed, and that flees in disorder (cp Job 21:18; Psalm 1:4; 35:5; Isa 29:5; Hosea 13:3). *And like a rolling thing*: Margin, ‘Thistle-down.’ It means, literally, anything that rolls. It is applied to chaff, stubble, or anything that is driven about by a whirlwind (Ps 83:14). *At evening-tide trouble*: In the time of evening — that is, in the night. *Before the morning he is not*: That is, he is destroyed. This is strikingly descriptive of the destruction of the army of Sennacherib on that fatal night when the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 men.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

“In that day men will look to their Maker and  
turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.”

— Isaiah 17:7 NIV