

Isaiah Part 17: “In quietness and in trust shall be your strength”

Isaiah 30 and 31

Warning against making an alliance with Egypt (Isaiah 30 v 1 to 7)

“Who set out to go down to Egypt... to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh” (v 2) – this prophecy was given at a time when the Assyrian army was on the offensive. The northern kingdom of Israel would be conquered by Assyria, and their people taken into exile. The Assyrians would then come against the southern kingdom of Judah, and so their leaders looked to Egypt for protection. In looking to Egypt, Judah forsook the LORD: “who carry out a plan, but not mine, and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit” (v 1). In one sense, it was wise for Judah to look outside for help. But in a greater sense, it was wrong to look to others – especially Egypt – for help, instead of looking to God. “Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame, and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation” (v 3) – from God’s perspective, the strength of Pharaoh was nothing. As God saw it, Egypt was just a ‘shadow’. “Everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them” (v 5) – the ambassadors of Egypt came to Judah, and saw they had nothing to ‘give’ them. It was foolish for Judah to trust in a nation that looked at them this way...

“An oracle on the beasts of the Negeb” (v 6) – Isaiah proclaims ‘an oracle’ against the pack animals of Judah, that carry the riches of Judah down to Egypt, through the wilderness, in an attempt to purchase protection against the Assyrians. It will be wasted money, because “Egypt’s help is worthless and empty” (v 7). Despite the riches that the pack animals bring across the desert, Egypt will not help Judah, so one could call Egypt ‘Rahab who sits still’. ‘Rahab’ is a name, but it is also the Hebrew word for ‘pride’, and is sometimes used as a title for Egypt (Psalm 87 v 4). Egypt will sit idly by as the Assyrians attack Judah.

- On what grounds does Isaiah urge his hearers that they should rely on God rather than on Egypt?

A rebellious people (Isaiah 30 v 8 to 17)

“Write it... on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever” (v 8) – God tells Judah what will happen before it happens, and wants it documented. This is so that when it all unfolds exactly as God has said, Judah’s faith in God will be strengthened. “They are a rebellious people, lying children... who say to the seers, ‘Do not see’... speak to us smooth things” (v 9, 10) – Judah wanted to hear from the prophets, but they did not want to hear the truth from them. Paul describes the same kind of heart in 2 Timothy 4 v 3, 4. “Because you despise this word... this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall” (12, 13) – God warns that because the people of Judah trusted in Egypt, they will be like a collapsed wall whose breaking comes suddenly, and like a shattered clay pot that is broken in pieces.

“In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (v 15) – God offered the promise of protection from Assyria. They did not need to look to Egypt for help; they could have trusted in God. This is a key verse: (i) trusting God means *returning* – if there is disobedience in our lives, we must return to God’s ways; (ii) trusting God means *rest* – we don’t need to strive for ourselves, we can rest in the Lord, and when we do, we will find salvation; (iii) trusting God means *quietness* – you don’t need to argue when God is on your side, you can be quiet before him and before others; (iv) when we trust God we will find *strength* – there is no one stronger than a Christ-follower who boldly trusts in the living God!

“You were unwilling, and you said, ‘No! We will flee upon horses’” (v 15, 16) – because Judah rejected God, and trusted in horses instead, they would have to flee! “A thousand shall flee at the threat of one” (v 17) – this is a reversal of the promise of Leviticus 26 v 8, and fulfilment of the curse promised in Leviticus 26 v 17.

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The LORD will be gracious (Isaiah 30 v 18 to 33)

“Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you” (v 18) – we may wonder why God waits to do things for us. Isaiah tells us that it is so he may be gracious: whenever God seems to delay, there is always a loving purpose behind it. “And therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you” – mercy exalts the goodness of God, showing him to be loving and generous. “For the LORD is a God of justice” – mercy and justice seem to oppose each other, but on the cross Jesus took the punishment we deserve: God’s justice was satisfied, and at the same time God shows mercy by extending the work of Jesus to us as payment for our sins (Romans 3 v 26). “Blessed are all those who wait for him” – there is a blessing for those who wait patiently for God.

- In verses 18 to 26, what blessings does God promise to his people after their trials? How has the promise of a Teacher (v 20) been fulfilled in Jesus? See John 14 v 26; 16 v 13.

“He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry” (v 19) – when God’s people wait on him and patiently trust his promise, God pours out his grace at their cry. Even if it feels God is distant, he hears and promises to answer. “Though the Lord give you the bread of adversity... your eyes shall see your Teacher” (v 20) – when the people of Judah was prosperous and comfortable, they would not listen to God. Now, God has given them the ‘bread of adversity’, but they can hear God and be guided by him again. “He will give rain for the seed” (v 23) – when the people of Judah put away their idols, and trust God’s promise, he will send material blessings. For a nation of farmers, it was a wonderful for their bread to be “rich and plenteous”. In a dry land, it was wonderful to have “brooks running with water”. But better than material blessings is God’s loving care: “when the LORD binds up the brokenness of his people” (v 26).

“Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar, burning with his anger” (v 27) – Isaiah sees God’s judgment coming, “to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction” (v 28). But God’s people need not fear, because they “shall have a song... and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute” (v 29). “The LORD will cause his majestic voice to be heard... the Assyrians will be terror-stricken” (v 30, 31) – God will ‘take care of’ the Assyrians (Isaiah 31 v 8). “For a burning place has long been prepared” (v 33) – the ‘burning place’ (*Topheth*, in Hebrew) was in the Valley of Hinnom, outside of Jerusalem’s walls (Jeremiah 7 v 31). It served as Jerusalem’s rubbish dump, and the smouldering fires made it a picture of hell.

Woe to those who go down to Egypt (Isaiah 31)

- Many trusted in Egypt because she seemed strong (v 1). How does Isaiah show the folly of this, as compared with trusting in God?

Isaiah confronts Judah with two sins: the sin of trusting in Egypt and their military might, and the sin of not “looking to the Holy One of Israel” (v 1). Judah felt they had a reason to trust in chariots (“because they are many”), and to trust in horsemen (“because they are very strong”). But they could not find a reason to trust in God! “Yet he is wise and brings disaster; he does not call back his words” (v 2) – these were good reasons to trust God. “The Egyptians are man, and not God” (v 3) – the Egyptians and their armies were not as mighty as they appeared to be: all God needed to do was to ‘stretch out his hand’.

“As a lion... growls over his prey, so the LORD of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion... Like birds hovering, so the LORD of hosts will protect Jerusalem” (v 4, 5) – the combination of these two images is powerful: God will defend Jerusalem with the ferocity of a lion, and the tender care of a bird. “The Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man” (v 8) – this was literally fulfilled, see 2 Kings 19 v 35.

Prayer – Lord, thank you for these words of warning, and words of promise. Help us to remember that in returning and rest we shall be saved, and that in quietness and in trust shall be our strength. Help us to realise that our ears shall hear a word behind us, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when we turn to the right or when we turn to the left – and that this comes from the day-by-day guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thank you, Lord, that you are gracious, and that you show us mercy, and that we are blessed as we wait for you. We praise you in Jesus’ name, Amen.