

ISAIAH

Chapter 17

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. 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 gleans 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. 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. 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 on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain. 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.

17:1 Damascus. The capital of Aram (Syria), located northeast of Mount Hermon on strategic trade routes between Mesopotamia, Egypt and Arabia. Since the time of David, the Arameans of Damascus were frequent enemies of Israel (see 2Sa 8:5; 1Ki 22:31). (CSB)

Capital of Aram, or Syria, north of Israel. (TLSB)

IN THIS chapter Isaiah prophesies more and more concerning the destruction of the ten tribes of Israel, rather than concerning Damascus. Above, however, he prophesied against Damascus, which was the capital of the kingdom of Syria. It was often destroyed and often rebuilt. Moreover, in that prophecy against Damascus he devoted himself more to the guilt and captivity of the kingdom of Israel, because the king of Israel had made a covenant with Syria against the kingdom of Judah, that is, was thus more closely joined to Gentiles than to Jews, yes, put more confidence in ungodly men than in God, and Judah suffered harm at the hands of its brothers, so to say. Therefore Israel, a partner in Syria's guilt, will become a partner in Syria's punishment. In the end, however, there is added consolation for the calamity. (Luther)

17:2 Aroer. About 14 miles east of the Dead Sea on the Arnon River. It marked the southern boundary of Aram's sphere of control (see 2Ki 10:32–33). (CSB)

Probably the city in Syria rather than the city named in Nu 32:34, east of the Jordan. (TLSB)

Aroer, however, means a plain where tamarisks grow, a place uncultivated and sandy. The prophet wants to say that Syria will be a desert after its people have been driven out, so that herds can safely recline there. (Luther)

17:3 *fortress*. Damascus acted as a bulwark against the Assyrian advance southward into Israel. (TLSB)

Ephraim. The northern kingdom (see note on 7:2) is mentioned here because of its alliance with Damascus against Assyria (see note on 7:1).

The Northern Kingdom, also called Ephraim and Jacob (vv 3–4), threw in its lot with its neighbor to the north (ch 7). Both states were to share the same fate (17:1–9). In 732 BC, the Assyrians captured Damascus. Ten years later, Samaria, capital of Israel, fell before the same invaders. (TLSB)

kingdom. In 732 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser III captured Damascus and made it an Assyrian province. Many of the cities of Israel were also captured. (CSB)

remnant. Those surviving the attack. If Syria shares the fate of Israel, it will be destroyed down to a remnant (7:16; 8:4). But then it will also have that remnant preserved, which fits with the hope to the Gentiles in 18:7. (TLSB)

17:4–11† The prophet shifts from Damascus to Israel (the northern kingdom)—a shift prepared for at the end of v. 3. (CSB)

17:4 *glory of Jacob* – This includes power, wealth, justice, wisdom, the worship of God, the cultivation of the land, wives, and many children. (Luther)

fat of his flesh – That is, the large and powerful kingdom will be feeble, sparse, and powerless. With the removal of the powerful and the nobles, only the dregs of the people, the poor and the peasants, worthless cobs will be left. The Assyrians will be the harvesters and grape-pickers. (Luther)

The picture being that of a man rapidly falling away under the influence of a severe fever. The power and wealth which both kingdoms had once more gained under the reign of Jeroboam II and Uzziah melted away to almost nothing. (Kretzmann)

17:5 *harvests the grain*. Harvest can signify a time of judgment (see Joel 3:13). (CSB)

Valley of Rephaim. A fertile area west of Jerusalem (Jos 15:8) and the scene of Philistine raids (1Ch 14:9). (CSB)

Fertile valley southwest of Jerusalem. Cf Jsh 15:8; 18:16. (TLSB)

This was a pleasant meadow and plain opposite Jerusalem toward the west, where there was much grain. In short: Lowliness is saved, pride perishes. (Luther)

The picture is that of a farmer going into a field of grain and gathering an armful of stalks with his left hand, while he cuts off the grain below with a sickle in his right hand. (Kretzmann)

17:6 *gleanings will be lefty* – In harvesting olives, the trees were first shaken, whereupon a few berries within reach were knocked down with sticks, but those which hung in the tree-tops, beyond reach, remained hanging. Thus only a few poor inhabitants would be left in Israel. (Kretzmann)

Cf Ru 2:15–16. A remnant will be left, but will only be as large, and as important, as the few olives left on the tree after harvest. (TLSB)

17:7 *man will look to his master* – This is what happens when the Lord rebukes the ungodly and the proud. The remnant learn righteousness; they are upright. Certainly, then, the man who will have been left and who will have survived the punishment will be turned to the Lord, and the idols and their empty worship will be forsaken. The works of their hands are also the ark and the temple, etc. But here only this is considered, where the Word of God is and where it is not. The Word puts its stamp of approval on the work, so that it may be called divine. A work apart from the Word of God is to be abhorred. (Luther)

For the small remnant of Israel and also of Judah, the spiritual Israel, returned to the true God and His worship. (Kretzmann)

An interesting event occurred just before the fall of Samaria. King Hezekiah of Judah sent messengers to the people of Israel inviting them to return to the Lord and celebrates the Passover in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 30). For the most part, the people of the Northern Kingdom scorned the invitation and ridiculed the couriers, but “some men of Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem (V. 11). The Lord demonstrated His love for these people in the last days before the Assyrian forces inflicted the judgment God Himself had prepared because of Israel’s rebellion. (PBC)

In the face of difficult times, some do “look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.” It still occurs today in the lives of individuals. When tragedy strikes, some repent. They understand that they cannot escape God’s judgment on their own and that they are absolutely helpless and powerless in the face of God’s judgment. Even the religious ideas upon which they depended for help evaporate in the heat of judgment. Only the Savior endures; they repent and turn to Him. (PBC)

The most frequent response to God’s judgment, however is obstinate unbelief. The unbeliever remains rebellious and complains, “How could God do this to me? I could never believe in a God who does such mean and terrible things. The unbeliever fails to recognize God’s invitation implicit in the trouble. (PBC)

Any person seeing the folly of idolatry. (TLSB)

Holy One of Israel. Used 26 times in Isaiah and only a few times elsewhere. Holiness includes all attributes of perfection that distinguish God from His creatures. Yet, He condescended to enter a covenant relationship with Israel, His chosen servant for salvation. When Israel fell into sin, they had to fear God’s holy wrath. (TLSB – p 1127)

Holy – Hebrew – qodesh, “set apart.” God, uncreated and unique, is the only source of holiness. He hallows time (feasts), place (tabernacle/temple), people (priests/Levites/Israel), and the things

and rituals that belong to them. In other words, these things belong to God because He selects them, not because of their own qualities. In the OT, there are degrees of holiness; what stands closest to God is “most holy.” What is not holy is “common” or “unclean.” These truths stand behind NT teaching about salvation as (1) purification from sin and (2) election by grace. (TLSB – p 7)

Most holy – Offerings presented to the Lord became “most holy” and provided sustenance for His priests. Only the priest were allowed to eat “most holy” food, and only in the sanctuary (courtyard of the tent of meeting). (TLSB p. 167)

It is He who truly makes holy. Not so other gods and works. The hypocrites, on the contrary, desire to make God holy. (Luther)

17:8 altars.† For Baal (cf. 1Ki 16:32). (CSB)

work of his hands – The eyes of all turn from their idolatry and back to the Lord, which is emphasized by the use of Maker (v. 7) against what is man-made. (TLSB)

altars of incense. Associated with high places in Lev 26:30 and with altars for Baal in 2Ch 34:4. (CSB)

Linked with Baal (2Ch 14:3–5). (TLSB)

Those of Baal, the sun-god, so that all the hosts of heaven were included in this idol-worship. Cp. 2 Kings 21, 7; 23, 5. It is the mercy of the Lord which preserves at least a remnant of people everywhere, in the midst of an almost universal apostasy, like brands snatched from the burning. (Kretzmann)

17:9 strong cities – This was the name for the cities in which there were idols. In the Scriptures God is called Rock, Confidence, Strength, Power, etc. But there were golden calves at Bethel and Dan. In short: When the children of Israel moved into the land of Canaan, there was nothing to do but to abandon everything and to flee. The aristocrats were killed, and the branches and bushes, that is, the lowest classes, were left. Hence, just as they did to the Canaanites, so it will be done to them. (Luther)

they. Perhaps the Canaanites, whose religious practices are referred to in v. 8. (CSB)

deserted...desolation – Literally, “like the forsaken places in the forests and mountain summits,” ruined strongholds in remote parts of the country. (Kretzmann)

All of the cities will be desolated, repeating the image of v 2. Strong cities offered protection to a person seeking refuge, but in this case, Damascus will be desolate. (TLSB)

17:10 you. Those engaged in idolatry (v 8). (TLSB)

Rock of your refuge.

Translates two terms: Hebrew sela, ‘rock’ or cliff face”; Hebrew tsur, “massive rock” or “boulder.” Psalms use the term interchangeably for a place of refuge or hiding. The Lord is “the Rock of my salvation” (89:26). (TLSB – p. 843)

In Exodus 17:1-7 water gushed from the rock and provided salvation (cf. 1 Cor.10:4). (TLSB)

plant pleasant plants – Paganism was dedicated to the mysterious forces of fertility in man, beast, and vegetation. The blossoming of plants symbolized the deity's return to life after winter's cold had killed him. (TLSB)

vines-branch. Probably representing the people of Israel (see 5:7; 18:5; 37:30–31). (CSB)

He is describing the emptiness of the religion invented by man and the plantings not of an earthly kingdom but of religion. The plants denote disciples instructed in the worship of idols, disciples who are unassuming, orderly, and compliant. Also, this righteousness has its own reward, namely, wealth, favor, peace, and therefore they are called "faithful" plantings, or rather, "pleasant." "These," he says, "you will prepare not for yourself but for a foreign king, namely, the king of the Assyrians." He describes the zeal and the diligence of the ungodly, which is nevertheless in vain. So they are also in a hurry to have arise and come to pass what they have planned. Yet its end and fruit is the devil. "He who sows to his own flesh," says Gal. 6:8, "will from the flesh reap corruption." They sow honey and it comes up mustard. (Luther)

17:11 *harvest will flee away*. Despite growth and blossoms, the plants fail to produce fruit/grain for the harvest. (TLSB)

It was because the northern kingdom, on the whole, had left the true God that its people had, literally, "planted plantings of pleasantness," had taken up the various sensuous heathen cults and had then planted a strange vine in their garden, namely, by becoming allies of the king of Damascus. The new plant had then been carefully fenced in, namely, by shrewd political schemes, so that the strange plant grew to maturity very rapidly, like a hothouse plant, for the alliance brought about a plan to attack Judah. But the whole scheme was frustrated by the action of Jehovah, who promptly reserved the garden of Ephraim as a heap, heaped up in the harvest, in the day of grief. Such is the consequence of the denial of the Lord and of fraternizing with the enemies of God. While Jehovah, however, used Assyria as His tool in punishing Ephraim, the great world-power itself would not escape His avenging power. (Kretzmann)

grief and incurable pain. Brought by the Assyrian invasions. (CSB)

17:12–14† The same sequence of a powerful invader that is quickly cut down occurs in 10:28–34. Both passages may refer to Sennacherib's invasion of 701 B.C. (see 37:36–37). (CSB)

17:12 *thundering of the sea*. Assyria is called "floodwaters" in 8:7. (CSB)

The nations, perhaps the multinational force of Assyria, have such vast numbers that the sound is as the roar of the sea. (TLSB)

This is the comfort for the king and the people of the Jews, that Assyria, about to lay waste the plantings and about to attempt to destroy the kingdom of Judah, will not achieve it but will itself perish. Yet it will come with an incalculable number of people, just like the sea, which cannot be contained at all when it breaks through, and it will come with great turbulence and noise, as of rampaging waters. The sea, rivers, mountains, trees symbolize kings, princes, aristocrats. Just as the sea devours the land, so the army overruns the people. But the Lord will thunder at them, the Assyrians and the roaring of the waters, and it will be very easy for Him to drive them off, just as the wind easily chases the chaff on the mountains exposed to the wind. In the valley the chaff is safer. But the prophet makes use of such grand words and poetic figures in order to strengthen

faith. For a fearful heart cannot be lifted up enough, while, on the contrary, a hardened heart cannot be terrified enough. Then he also consoles the former so that they may be forearmed and may not despair when the disaster strikes. (Luther)

The enemies of Israel, who are also types of the enemies of the Church, are pictured as being in a state of seething unrest, anxiously striving to harm the Lord's people. (Kretzmann)

If you have ever heard a large crowd from a distance, you will appreciate Isaiah's picture here. A stadium full of people cheering for their team on the field has the quality of the raging surf of the ocean. (PBC)

17:13 *He*. The Lord. (TLSB)

chaff. Symbolic of the enemy also in 29:5; 41:15–16; Ps 83:13. (CSB)

They are small, insignificant, and easily scattered by a greater force. (TLSB)

The picture being taken from the open threshing-floors of the Orient, which were usually situated in elevated places. (Kretzmann)

This is like whirling dust or particles of straw from the threshing-floor, as the wind picks them up and flings them away. (Kretzmann)

17:14 *at evening time* – He is alluding to the statement in Psalm 30:5: “Weeping may tarry for the night.” This means that that disaster will be of short duration. One bad night before the morning breaks, and the matter with the afflicting Assyrians will be disposed of. But every trial seems permanent to our mind, and our reason does not see the end of the trial. Therefore divine mercy appoints an end for it which we cannot grasp. With God our trial is but of an evening's duration. The flesh, however, does not know how to reckon this but judges according to the senses. Therefore we must rather cling by faith to the Word of God. But these promises apply to us by way of example. For although we have the Word, we must expect all the troubles that others have sustained. Therefore, for the same affliction we make use of the same promise and comfort. Trials seem long lasting, but they are short before God, who provides the outcome and will indeed permit us to be afflicted but not overcome. For we are founded on the solid Rock, which is Christ. (Luther)

before morning they are no more – Assyria would lay siege even to Jerusalem, but in a night God would deliver His people. In the morning light, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers would be dead. (PBC)

The seemingly great army is gone in a day (37:36–37). (TLSB)

portion ... lot. What they deserved. (TLSB)

Ch 17 Even great urban centers such as Damascus can offer no security against disaster. Yet, as with Israel, the Lord will preserve a remnant. Those who trust in the works of their own hands are guilty of idolatry. When we fear, love, and trust in created things more than in the Maker of all things, we have forgotten the God of our salvation, who sent His Son, Jesus, to bear our sins of idolatry and to bless us with the refuge of His forgiveness. With faith in Him, we can live without fear. • Maker and Refuge, You are the giver of every good gift. May we never forget You, but always remember that we walk in Your sight. Amen. (TLSB)