

ISAIAH

Chapter 20

A Sign Against Egypt and Cush

In the year that the commander in chief, who was sent by Sargon the king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and captured it— 2 at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,” and he did so, walking naked and barefoot. 3 Then the LORD said, “As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush,[a] 4 so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt. 5 Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast. 6 And the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, ‘Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?’”

20:1–6 An epilogue to chs. 18–19, as 16:13–14 is to 15:1–16:12. (CSB)

20:1 *the year.* Probably 711 B.C. (CSB)

IN THE last chapter Isaiah foretold the calamity of Egypt together with a promise of grace to come through Christ. Now he goes on to foretell misfortune in that appointed time for their neighbors, the Ethiopians, with whom they had made a treaty to withstand the king of Assyria. And the prophet points out that that trust is worthless, and they will be put to shame in it. The fear of God and faith in God, as all histories teach, have no room in us, unless reliance on ourselves and our flesh will first have been east out. But the Gospel is at war with all the exalted things of the world, which are an abomination in the sight of God. (Luther)

commander. Assyrian title. Not named. Referenced in an Assyrian inscription discovered at Ashdod. (TLSB)

Sargon. Sargon II, who reigned 721–705 B.C. He is mentioned by name only here in the OT. (CSB)

Sargon II was one of the most powerful of the Assyrian kings (see note, 14:4). Mentioned only here in Scripture, his name vanished until archaeologists unearthed the ruins of the empire he helped build. His reign began shortly after Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom, became a victim of the Assyrian war machine. (TLSB)

Ashdod. One of the five Philistine cities (see map of “Five Cities of the Philistines”), Ashdod was located near the Mediterranean Sea about 18 miles northeast of Gaza. The city had rebelled against Assyria in 713 under King Azuri. In 1963 three fragments of an Assyrian monument commemorating Sargon’s victory and mentioning Sargon by name were discovered at Ashdod. (CSB)

C 20 mi NE of Gaza, near the Great Sea. (TLSB)

20:2 sackcloth. † Normally the garment of mourners (see note on 15:3), but perhaps also the garb of prophets (see 2Ki 1:8; Zec 13:4). (CSB)

Rough cloth worn by mourners and, at times, prophets (2Ki 1:8; cf Mt 3:4). (TLSB)

Thus God is wont to add a sign to His Word, not of mutual love and recognition, because love itself and the other fruits of faith and the Spirit are stronger. The deceivers, too, can be baptized and can participate in the Lord's Supper. And the miracles of Christ are signs, not that the Christians might recognize each other by them¹ but that faith might be strengthened by them. God, however, adds signs to the Word to arouse faith and fear and because He does not wish to give His Spirit except through some outward means. For that reason He has instituted the ministry of the Word and the signs, through which the Spirit may be given. Thus, too, He was first given in the strong wind and fiery tongues, as we read in Acts 2:3. The external thing, unless divinely ordained, of course accomplishes nothing. But what is divinely instituted cannot fail to produce results. Here the sign is added as if it were the Word, concrete and before the eyes, so that the sign might teach the same thing that the Word teaches. (Luther)

naked – That is, with only his tunic or shirt-like garment. (Kretzmann)

The impression Isaiah made on his society might be similar to the impression any of us would make going to work or shopping in our underclothes. (PBC)

Isaiah, who walks and talks with kings (Is 7; 36–39), is commanded to walk naked. He is not told to proclaim anything. Action, rather than words, provides the key element. (TLSB)

barefoot – Presenting the appearance of one who had been robbed or spoiled, stripped of his possessions, like a beggar or captive of war. The very dress of Isaiah called attention to his message of repentance. (Kretzmann)

20:3 my servant. A title for prophets and others used by God in a special way. (CSB)

three years. The duration of this sign is three years. and then it will be fulfilled indeed. In Jeremiah there is the sign of a chain around the prophet's neck, summoning the people to fear and repentance (Jer. 27:2). (Luther)

To bring home with great emphasis the lesson which the Lord wished to convey, (Kretzmann)

sign and portent. † The prophet Ezekiel's behavior also had symbolic significance (Eze 24:24, 27; cf. Zec 3:8). (CSB)

Walking naked symbolizes the Egyptians, who will be defeated by Assyria and whose captives will walk naked into exile. Prisoners were stripped to humiliate them. (TLSB)

By dressing as a prisoner of war, Isaiah was a sign of the coming downfall of Egypt. (PBC)

20:4 lead away. Fulfilled in 671 BC. (TLSB)

20:5 they. Presumably political leaders in Judah, who might have hoped, according to vv 5–6, that Egypt would offer help to Judah in the face of pressure from the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In

light of the impotence of Egypt in 19:1–15 and the sign of Isaiah here in ch 20, the Lord emphasizes that there is no hope in other nations. Rather, Judah is to look to Him. (TLSB)

Cush was their hope and of Egypt. After Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722–721 B.C., King Hezekiah of Judah was under great pressure to make an alliance with Egypt. Isaiah urgently warned against such a policy (cf. 30:1–2; 31:1). (CSB)

Hope, or refuge. God more readily puts up with anything else than with presumption and trust in the flesh. He crushes the serpent’s head (cf. Gen. 3:15), He derides trust in the flesh. “It’s splendid, the way we have been set free!” they say. This is sarcasm. From the rain we have plunged into the river. “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love” (Ps. 147:11). (Luther)

ashamed – they shall cease their undertaking. Egypt will be deterred from Ethiopia out of fear, seeing itself put to shame in its confidence, which it had toward that country to which it looked as to a sure help. And Ethiopia has boasted of Egypt in vain. We ought to boast in the Lord alone, for He punishes those who deny Him. This, then, is the goal of all histories, namely, to teach and to learn faith, fear, and humility and to reprove pride, presumption, and trust in the flesh. (Luther)

how shall we escape – The nation which they considered strong and mighty had proved itself powerless against the common enemy; how, then, could the weaker states hope to escape? It is but another instance of the folly of men in placing their trust in the power of flesh and believing that they can escape the Lord. (Kretzmann)

20:6 *inhabitants of this coastland.* Anyone (Jew or Gentile) in the region who thought an alliance with Egypt or Cush could save them. Only God could. (TLSB)

The nation which they considered strong and mighty had proved itself powerless against the common enemy; how, then, could the weaker states hope to escape? It is but another instance of the folly of men in placing their trust in the power of flesh and believing that they can escape the Lord. (Kretzmann)

Ch 20 The Lord commands Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years as a sign to Cush and Egypt of their impending Assyrian exile. Through this unusual act, Isaiah proclaims the futility of earthly alliances that oppose the Lord’s will. Although we are not called to imitate Isaiah’s unusual witness to the world, our actions and words should show that escape from God’s wrath comes only through saving faith in Jesus. Christ clothes all who are ashamed and exposed because of sin. He covers our sin with His forgiveness. • Dearest Lord Jesus, grant that our words and actions confess that You alone are the way, the truth, and the life. Amen. (TLSB)