

GOD PROTECTS

Isaiah 31:1-9

“Double, double toil and trouble” sang the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as they cooked up a potion to create a “charm” of powerful trouble. It might seem to us, at times, that the witches have been working overtime since our world is plagued with “powerful trouble.” Wherever we look, we can see evidence of threats and perils that would destroy our nation, our way of life and literally life itself. When there are threats to our very survival, then everything else takes a back seat or lower priority until the threats are removed or neutralized or we adjust our expectations.

When we are threatened and we have a sense that our very security is at risk, then we seek protection by doing whatever the “experts” tell us to do. We do those things and by what we do we give testimony of that in which we put our trust. If you are “uncomfortable” with those last two sentences, then I feel your pain, because I also realize that I and most of us are guilty of putting our trust in things that are of “the world” rather than looking by faith to the Lord.

The situation in Judah during the days of Hezekiah was very perilous because of the threats from Assyria which was a dominating force throughout that region. Assyria had already attacked and conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (726 BC) and demanded tribute payments from Judah. At age 25, Hezekiah became king of Judah (717 BC) and paid the extortion fees to the Assyrians. During this time, many in Judah advise Hezekiah to enlist help from Egypt to free the nation from the oppression of Assyria. God’s message for the nation through Isaiah was strongly in opposition to what seemed to many to be the obvious and most responsible thing they could do.

False Hope – 31:1-3

¹ Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help And rely on horses, And trust in chariots because they are many And in horsemen because they are very strong, But they do not look to the Holy One of Israel, nor seek the LORD! ² Yet He also is wise and will bring disaster And does not retract His words, But will arise against the house of evildoers And against the help of the workers of iniquity. ³ Now the Egyptians are men and not God, And their horses are flesh and not spirit; So the LORD will stretch out His hand, And he who helps will stumble And he who is helped will fall, And all of them will come to an end together. Isaiah 31:1–3 (NASB95)

There is a total of twenty-two “woes” given in Isaiah’s prophecy. Most of these applied to individuals in their choices that impacted daily living. Starting in chapter 28 and continuing through chapter 33, God issued six “catastrophe woes” that would impact nations that misplaced their trust. In our present text we find the fifth woe in this subset which is similar to the fourth woe that was given in chapter thirty.

The warning to not ever turn to Egypt for help had been a constant reminder to Israel from the time they were delivered and literally escaped from Egyptian bondage and slavery. Even when they were traveling through the wilderness to the Promised Land, it seemed that every time there was any difficulty or problem, there would be some who suggested that they “go back to Egypt.” It was as if they preferred the apparent “security” of their former Egyptian masters to being free and having to take responsibility and trust in the Lord for all their needs. Even today, there are debates over the balance that we as individuals and as a nation need to make between freedom and security. History has shown that restricting liberty to obtain security results in losing both.

The specific situation of making an alliance with Egypt to help them against the threats of

the Assyrians probably seemed quite reasonable to the leaders of Judah. It seems reasonable only if you ignore the word of God. In conjunction with the giving of the Law, Moses warned them to not make covenants with the people in the land of Canaan. Exodus 23:32 says “Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor with their gods.” By implication, it was reasonable that they should not make a covenant with Egypt since God had declared that Egypt would never again be a significant power in the world. In Deuteronomy 17:16 God told them that when they would have a king of God’s choosing that he would not go to Egypt for horses and chariots. Going to Egypt for help had always been a temptation to the Jews but that would be like a Christian continuing to make decisions and then operating by the same principles as the rest of the world does rather than relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It is not difficult to understand why the leaders of Judah would turn to Egypt for help since they had many horses, chariots and soldiers and Judah did not. Judah was being threatened and dominated by Assyria who also had horses, chariots and soldiers. The common everyday wisdom would suggest that they “fight fire with fire.” It probably seemed irresponsible to them to listen to a poet who said that God “told him things” when the danger to their existence was so close at hand. They likely did not care what Moses had said seven hundred years ago. They probably make statements to the effect that “things were different now and people have to adjust their thinking to fit the times in which they lived.”

I think that most of us have heard similar arguments being made today about the direction in which our nation is going. Anytime someone suggests that we follow the Word of God, the idea is immediately dismissed as being out-of-date and not applicable to the present-day situation. We will likely be told that what Jesus or Paul said was for their times and not for us today in our more modern, sophisticated culture.

The problem that Judah had and the same problem that we have today is summed up very succinctly in the second part of the very first verse: “They nor we seek the Lord for direction and protection.” The message in the early part of Chapter 31 seems almost parallel to the message in the first part of Chapter 30. This may be parallelism taking on a bigger scale or these two chapters might even be slightly different versions of the same prophetic warning.

In Chapter 30, Isaiah stated that the leaders of Judah had “taken counsel but not from God, and had made a covenant but not of God’s spirit.” Apparently, the Jews thought that the Egyptians were wise and that they could rely on Egypt to be faithful to whatever alliance they had agreed to. We see a follow up to this comment in the second verse of Chapter 31 where Isaiah wrote that God is also wise (wiser than the Egyptians) and He is in control of the troubles and problems that the region was experiencing. Not only that, Judah was assuming that Egypt would be faithful to any covenant; however, they could be absolutely sure that God would “not retract His words” but would keep the promises made to Israel centuries ago. Among these promises were “defined consequences” for those who do evil and those who work iniquity.

A further warning was given to the effect that the Egyptians were just men and not God and as such they would experience failures and those whom they were helping would also fail. (This may be like saying that if the blind leads the blind, then both will fall into the ditch.) The lesson to be taken from this is that real help comes from God who will never fail because He is omnipotent and caring.

True Faithfulness – 31:4-5

⁴ For thus says the LORD to me, “As the lion or the young lion growls over his prey, Against which a band of shepherds is called out, And he will not be terrified at their voice nor disturbed at their noise, So will the LORD of hosts come down to wage war on Mount Zion and on its hill.” ⁵ Like flying birds so the LORD of hosts will protect

Jerusalem. He will protect and deliver it; He will pass over and rescue it. Isaiah 31:4-5 (NASB95)

The reason the leaders of Judah were tempted to turn to Egypt was for protection. Protection was already available because God had pledged to take care of them. The powerful protection that God would provide was described in two analogies. The example of a lion protecting his prey that was captured and not being frightened away by shepherds who were trying to rescue the prey shows the strength comparison of God to other spiritual forces that were at work in that region of the world. (Recall that Isaiah reminded the leaders that the Egyptians were mere men and not God and their horses were flesh and not spirit.)

The second example was of a powerful bird such as an eagle hovering over its nest to protect the young eaglets. This example combines the characteristics of power and loving care which we associate with God. Knowing God's ability and His love, Isaiah could prophesy an inspiring promise regarding the protection that He would provide for Judah (specifically Mount Zion) at the time it was needed.

The problem that Judah's leaders had and that we also experience is that we seem to be unwilling to "wait upon the Lord" and trust in Him to deliver exactly what we need at the appropriate time. Since we (and they) sometimes fail to even consider God (except as an after thought) and, consequently, we become anxious and attempt to "fix" whatever we think is wrong in our own strength or by using the ways of the world.

Repentance Demonstrated – 31:6-9

⁶ Return to Him from whom you have deeply defected, O sons of Israel. ⁷ For in that day every man will cast away his silver idols and his gold idols, which your sinful hands have made for you as a sin. ⁸ And the Assyrian will fall by a sword not of man, And a sword not of man will devour him. So he will not escape the sword, And his young men will become forced laborers. ⁹ "His rock will pass away because of panic, And his princes will be terrified at the standard," Declares the LORD, whose fire is in Zion and whose furnace is in Jerusalem. Isaiah 31:6-9 (NASB95)

It is wonderful that God's message of salvation does not change. The way to be saved is simply "repent and believe." Here we see this same message coming from Isaiah in the words "return to Him from whom you have deeply defected." "Returning" is the same as repentance and the idea of casting away idols is a cessation of efforts to save themselves by the work of their own hands. The alternative was to trust in God's provision for salvation. We see this formula for salvation applied to the specific situation of the Jewish leaders wanting to go to Egypt. It would seem that going to Egypt for help was seen by God as akin to worshiping idols. The logic is "that in which we put our confidence is essentially what we worship." Isaiah's message was that the only salvation they would have would come from turning away from Egypt (returning) and putting confident trust (resting) in God's provision.

The leaders did not want any part of such a plan. They wanted to rely on something they could see and touch. They rejected faith in God and instead relied being able to run away if the battle did not go in their favor. The problem with such an approach was that when you rely on your own strength or speed or intelligence, someone will come along with more strength, speed or intelligence. If our confidence is in Jehovah God, then we can have confidence that nothing is greater than God.

In verse 8 Isaiah's prediction was that the Assyrians (which was the source of their fears) would be defeated by divine intervention rather than by anything the Egyptians might do. Since we know the rest of the story, we know that did happen and this is recorded in Isaiah 37:36. This victory by God's angel came about after the people finally listened to Isaiah's warning and under the leadership of King Hezekiah the people did repent and got rid of their idols as proof that they had turned back to God.

The description of what would happen to the Assyrians when God fought to protect Judah was predicted by Isaiah. Thousands of the Assyrian army died when God sent his angel and some think that the army and their king Sennacherib actually saw something (an epiphany of the angel?) described by Isaiah as an uplifted standard (battle flag) and it frightened them so much that they ran away and fled back to an Assyrian stronghold – probably Nineveh. It would seem that they realized that the attack upon them was supernatural and it was overwhelmingly scary.

The last part of verse nine about the fire of God and His furnace is in Zion or Jerusalem is thought by some to be related to the fire of God's altar at the Temple that was to never go out and the furnace or oven that was used to bake bread from grain offerings. However, if we believe that Chapters 30 and 31 are parallel, we see a reference in Chapter 30 to fire associated with the valley of Topheth where the waste and garbage of the city were continually burning. This area was the "picture" of hell with hot fires and terrible odors (burning brimstone) that would be the place where the enemies of God would be assigned. In that sense, those who oppose God and would attack His stronghold would wind up in a hellish place.

When times are hard, where do we ultimately look for relief and protection? If we are not careful, we can look for help in all the wrong places and create more problems for ourselves. It took a word of God from His prophet and the leadership of a godly king to help the people realize that they needed to look to the Lord rather than follow the ways of the world. The amazing thing is that, in the church, when we do look to God, then He sends comfort directly from the Holy Spirit and He sends help from others in the Body of Christ.