

ISAIAH 7:18-25

(Reading: Isaiah 7:1-25)

Without God's Blessing There's Only Cursing!

We would all agree that the first 17 verses of Isaiah 7 has made it all very clear to Ahaz. In fact, it could well be that he has grown somewhat tired of Isaiah and his very uncomfortable prophecies from the Lord about the future. As the determined unbeliever he was, the last thing he wanted was anymore of this from the prophet.

But that's not going to happen. Actually, in the last part of this chapter the Lord through Isaiah is going to describe what's going to happen to Judah in the most graphic way.

God does this through four clear images. In the same way we might draw a picture to illustrate a point we have been making, Isaiah paints the most obvious scenes.

And it's not just one or two of these drawings here – there has to be four to drive the Lord's point home here! Each one clearly identified as a separate image by the use of the same phrase to introduce it, for the prophet says before each one, "in that day," to tell of another devastation that is most certainly coming. And by the time you get to the end of the fourth one it will all be absolutely clear-cut! There's no future here!

The Imagery of the Flying Insects

So we go then to the first of these word pictures. This is **THE IMAGERY OF THE FLYING INSECTS**.

I don't think any of us like flies or bees too close to us. We know they serve a special purpose in the natural eco-system but we'd rather not have them in the house! Actually, having flies around usually makes us wonder if there is something around that is dead or rotting. They like that kind of decaying, moist environment. This describes the Egypt of this time very well. That region did have a lot of flies because of the swampy nature of their country. And Assyria was well known for the bees from its mountainous and woody countryside. The keeping of bees is still a major industry in those parts.

But here the prophet draws those things which represent these countries to picture the way they operate militarily. Because when Egypt came it invaded with a huge multitude of troops, just like flies will do. And the Assyrians loved war and conquest. They were stinging bees that are so hard to keep off!

It's these forces which will fight each other in Palestine. At the place so strategic for trade and political expansion, they would battle each other there because there was no other power. Judah would be long gone – in the same way that Israel and Syria were about to get wiped out!

Don't forget who's doing this, though! For how have those powers ended up there? Ah, the Lord has whistled for them! That's what verse 18 begins with. And it's what all the other verses of this chapter will show too.

Ahaz is being reminded again how his request for help has turned against him. Instead of liberating, it is obliterating! The Promised Land will become nothing more than disputed land! Some may say here, though, that such a battle didn't actually take place until the Babylonians were the dominant eastern power. It was Nebuchadnezzar who met Pharaoh-Neco in such a way quite a while later.

The point here, however, is that this is what is being initiated by the unbelief of Ahaz. Because he was not willing to ask for a sign and, then, when the sign was given, to believe in the sign, he is bringing this upon the land. Just like so many other kings of Judah too!

And don't think it refers only to the great battle between those two empires. There will be quite a number of times their armies ravage Judah before that time. That's been clearly spoken about just before this passage.

The Imagery of the Razor

Next Isaiah speaks prophetically using THE IMAGERY OF THE RAZOR. This is our second aspect. And here we go to the next verse – verse 20. It's only one verse. But what a description! For while you may wonder what's so bad about a shave it meant something quite different then! And when you understand what is actually being shaved here you'll see that too!

For Judah here is a man stripped naked. He's got no clothes on whatsoever! And then they shave that naked man.

Now it does not seem to mean they literally shave every hair off his body. But let's see which hairs they do shave.

Firstly, there's the hair on his head. This was the hair that was meant to be a man's crowning glory. You read enough descriptions about the handsomeness of a man pictured also through his hair. There's no shortage of commercials pushing products and treatment to keep or add your hair!

And isn't grey hair seen as a sign of a ripe old age? Proverbs 20 verse 29 says that the splendour of the old is in their grey hair.

That hair on the head is shaved off. Judah will be bald. And that was a terrible insult, one which Elisha suffered in 2nd Kings 2 verse 23.

But it gets worse. Next, verse 20 pictures the hairs of the legs being shaved off. Okay, we say, but isn't that more a fashion choice? Many women today shave their legs – and some men too! But we are not hearing about what is done in private. Nor are we hearing about what is on the legs themselves. Because this is a public display where the pubic hairs are shaved! What utter shame!

Do you see how disgraceful it will be for God's people in that day? All dignity is taken away! And to top it all off the very thing a man was never ever to shave in the Old Testament is also completely cut away, because next the beard is shaved.

The only time the law proscribed removing the beard was in cases of leprosy. Under no other circumstances was a man's beard to be touched. Leviticus 19 verse 27 even declares, "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard."

True, we can say verse 20 is most of all a symbolic picture. But what a description! And what a humiliation! Because this represents the whole Promised Land being stripped bare. The land would be completely depopulated – a desert. At best it could only serve as grazing for animals.

The Imagery of the Poverty

There is then the third picture. For in the verses 22 and 23 we meet, THE IMAGERY OF THE POVERTY. And here even that grazing is reduced to a subsistence level.

Isaiah describes what the typical inhabitant of the land will have then. A description backed up by what Jeremiah says one hundred and twenty years later. Because Jeremiah 39 verse 10 tells of what happened at that time.

Forget the huge herds and flocks which are the strongest and most fully-fed anywhere! A Judean family will own nothing more than a young cow and a couple of sheep or goats. Anything of value has been taken!

But, you know, it won't matter anyway! Because there are so few left in the land it will be enough to get them by. Only just, though!

There's a bit of honey, too. But don't think that you'll be able to sweeten your coffee or tea with that. For that honey is the only extra with the curds, which is simply thickened milk. There's nothing else in the pantry!

The picture is clear. It's not much of a meal. In fact, soon enough and it's quite an awful meal. That's all you get to eat! Day after day, week after week, month after month! Meal after meal it's all the same!

The Imagery of the Land Gone to Waste

So whoever has escaped the Assyrian razor is yet still getting quite cut back physically! And no wonder! Look at the state of the fields. In the words of the fourth aspect to this text we see, THE IMAGERY OF THE LAND GONE TO WASTE.

Have a look at the verses 23 till 25. What was it that kept coming back? In fact, we heard it three times over in these verses.

Ah, in each verse there is the phrase "briers and thorns." As if we haven't got sick of that constant diet of thickened milk and honey, here's that reminder that you're not going to get anything else out of the land.

Land, by the way, that had been worth quite a lot on the market. Verse 23 spells out how much the real estate prices had been. For there had been thousands of properties worth millions! As each vine was worth a silver shekel, which is about a hundred dollars, you add up a thousand of them! It comes to a cool million dollars! And this is when we're taking it quite conservatively!

From boom to bust! Doesn't that hit at what the natural man loves!

Now that land's turned into wild bush. So overgrown, in fact, verse 24 pictures men going out hunting in those fields with bow and arrows for wild animals. At best that land can only be used for very rough pasture. Indeed, it is about all the pasture you'll be able to get for your small number of livestock.

The picture is clear. Judah will be humbled. The land where David and Solomon had once ruled in splendour and might, will be a pitiful waste-land! As the words of Hebrews 6 verse 8 tell us, "land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned."

Will Ahaz get the picture? Not likely! But it won't stop Isaiah declaring the Lord's word to him and to Judah as a whole.

The verses 18 till 25 have vividly portrayed the scene of verse 15. The warning is clear. Ignoring the sign will mean utter desolation!

This is not just about Israel and Syria now. It's not bad news for the enemies. This is the worst news for you!

So, did Ahaz respond? Does subsequent history show him turning right around? Definitely not! But what happens does prove the Lord got it absolutely right. Judah became a slave to Assyria. And not long after that it was as decimated as Israel and Syria.

This brings to an end Isaiah's address to King Ahaz. It is clear that 'Immanuel' - "God with us" - is not going to happen until Israel and Syria are vanquished, and Judah herself is enslaved. And this has left the commentators giving us all kinds of disputed time lines.

What it does mean, though, is that it's within this poverty he will be born. And that was certainly fulfilled in Christ's birth. For all the Jew's hope of a glorious coming, the Messiah's arrival was exactly as was foretold - in humility.

It's no surprise Isaiah is quoted as much as he is in the New Testament. For not only is this the biggest prophetic book, it is the one above all that prophesies the most about the Messiah.

When the great Augustine asked Ambrose which of the sacred books was best studied after his conversion, the answer was "Isaiah."

You see, this book describes accurately the life of Christ long before He was on earth. The 'sign' is clearly explained. And this at a time some seven hundred years before His birth! It is a sad note this chapter ends on. The king – and the people who followed him – did not want the sign. Even though it is the nature of Jews to want a sign, as 1st Corinthians 1:22 confirms, they did not want God's sign.

And today it is no different. The only sign so many millions of the Jews want to see are dollar signs! They have become so wrapped up with this world and all its comforts.

Strange, isn't it? Despite the clear sign, and despite these clear words of our text which stripped away all their worldly comforts, Ahaz still wouldn't let go. He had to have it all – now!

But are we any different? Oh, yes, we can say we believe in the sign. "We're Christians, aren't we?" But what takes up our lives? Is it that keen looking forward to Christ's coming again?

Or are we too wrapped up in what excites us here and now?

Dear friend, is your heart in the right place? Do you realise how much this is all His grace?

Let me test you. You think of the opposite thing to what you love. Go on. Picture the equivalent of the "briers and thorns" in your life. How would it affect you if you lost everything you have here below and were left just with that? The very thing you definitely don't want!

Would you still be happy in His love?