

DON'T FORGET THE LORD

17 The oracle concerning Damascus. Look! Damascus will no longer be a city, but will become a heap of ruins! 2The cities of Aroer will be deserted; [they will be] left to flocks that will lie down there, with no one to make them afraid. 3The fortified city will be taken away from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Syria will have the same fate as the glory of the children of Israel, declares Jehovah of hosts. 4On that day the glory of Jacob will fade, and the fatness of his body will waste away. 5It will be as when the reaper gathers the standing grain, and with his arms reaps the ears; indeed, it will be as when a man gleanes heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim.

6Nevertheless, some gleanings will remain—as when an olive tree is beaten, leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches, four or five on the fruitful boughs, declares Jehovah, the God of Israel. 7On that day men will look to their Maker, and their eyes will look with reverence to the Holy One of Israel. 8They will not look to the altars, the work of their own hands; neither will they reverence the Asherah poles and the sun images which their fingers have made.

9On that day their strong cities will become like the abandoned places in the forest and on the mountaintops that were abandoned [by the former inhabitants when] the children of Israel [conquered the land]—[the land] will be desolate. 10[All this will happen] because you have forgotten the God who is your Savior, and have not remembered the Rock that is your refuge. Therefore, you have placed [in the soil] the choicest plants and have planted imported vines. 11On the day you planted, you placed a hedge around these vines. In the morning you caused your seed to blossom; but the harvest will vanish on the day of grief and desperate sorrow!

12Oh, the uproar of multitudes of peoples! They roar like the roaring sea! And the raging of nations! They rage like the raging of mighty waters! 13The nations shall rage like the raging of many waters, but he will rebuke them and they will flee to distant places—they will be driven away like the whirling dust [is driven] by a gale. 14In the evening, look, there is terror! But before the morning [dawns], they are gone. This is what is [in store] for those who plunder us, and this is the lot of those who pillage us. (Isa. 17:1-14)

Introduction

“Until a dozen years ago, I thought I was completely in control of my life,” confesses Mr. Stephen Rowan.

“It was easy for me to chart my course and see how I was progressing in the company. I had my entire future carefully mapped out with insurance policies, investments and a house for security. My philosophy was that man is at the center of life and has all the answers.”

“Once in the early 1970s, when my wife Nancy and I were living in Chicago, she said, ‘We really ought to thank God for all the blessings He has given us.’ I responded, ‘You don’t thank God! You thank me! I’m the one who brings home the paycheck;

I'm the one who pays the bills; I'm the one who plans how we are going to spend the money.'" (POWER, 4/2/89,pp.2-ff.)

Here was a man who thought that he could make it on his own. Here was a man who forgot the LORD. Can you identify with this man? Is this where you are in your life? Do you believe that you are the center of life and that you have all the answers? Do you put your confidence in your own ability and planning? Do you put your confidence in your investments and securities? Have you forgotten the LORD? This was the attitude and outlook of Old Testament Israel as described in Isaiah 17.

Like Israel, we are prone to forget the LORD, thinking that we are able to fend for ourselves. But, as we learn from this present passage of Scripture, to do so is to court disaster. The message of Isaiah 17 is this: Don't forget the LORD!

I. Don't Forget the LORD, ...When Your Riches Increase (Isa. 17:4-5)

Verse 4-5 speak about the prosperity and abundance of material blessing enjoyed by the nation of Israel: *"On that day the glory of Jacob will fade, and the fatness of his body will waste away. ⁵It will be as when the reaper gathers the standing grain, and with his arms reaps the ears; indeed, it will be as when a man gleanes heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim."* Verse 4 speaks of *"the fatness of Israel's body;"* an evidence of his abundant prosperity and self-indulgence. In verse 5 the nation is compared to a fertile, fruitful field; by way of illustration, Isaiah is pointing the people to the fertile fields of the valley of Rephaim located southwest of Jerusalem. So many of us can identify with Israel in her state of material prosperity. So many of us live a comfortable life filled with modern day luxuries and surrounded by economic well-being and security in the form of investments, insurance and pension plans.

But with the blessing of material prosperity and security there is also the temptation to forget the LORD, consider Deuteronomy 8:11-18,

Be careful that you do not forget Jehovah your God, failing to observe his commandments, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹²Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart will become proud and you will forget Jehovah your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. ¹⁶He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. ¹⁷You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." ¹⁸But remember Jehovah your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce

wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (Deut. 8:11-18)

The temptation to forget the LORD is most powerful when our lives are surrounded and engulfed in material prosperity, as is indicated in Deuteronomy 8:11a, 12-14a. In this condition of material prosperity comes the unique temptation expressed in Deuteronomy 8:14a, *“then your heart will become proud and you will forget Jehovah your God”*—the LORD becomes irrelevant to our everyday lives, we lose the God-centered and God-dependent perspective. There is the tendency to personally take credit for our prosperity, failing to acknowledge the goodness of the LORD and His covenant faithfulness, note, again, Deuteronomy 8:17-18. Do we thank the LORD for all the material blessings He has heaped upon us, or do we congratulate ourselves for wise decisions, hard work and shrewd business transactions? As Deuteronomy 8:11b indicates, forgetting the LORD inevitably leads to neglecting His commandments. If we don't think about God, we are not going to consider His commandments either. If we do not attribute our prosperity to the LORD, we are not going to be keenly aware of our accountability to the LORD either. When we focus on the enjoyment of our prosperity, and our own role in gaining that prosperity, we will inevitably push God out of our lives and consign Him and His commandments to some distant corner of heaven. Forgetting the LORD ultimately leads to apostasy and judgment: *“If you ever forget Jehovah your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. ²⁰Like the nations Jehovah destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying Jehovah your God”* (Deut. 8:19-20.) This was the judgment that was now coming upon the nation of Israel in the days of Isaiah. We must be aware that these things were also written for our admonition, to keep us from falling into the same sinful pattern as them and succumbing to the same judgment.

Let us be careful that we do not forget the LORD, especially when our riches increase. If we are truly wise, and if we are willing to accept wise and godly counsel, we will appreciate and appropriate for ourselves the wisdom expressed in Proverbs 30:8b-9, *“give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me my daily bread. ⁹Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is Jehovah?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”*

II. Don't Forget the LORD, ...and Rely upon Your Own Devices (Isa. 17:1-3,7-11)

As verses 1-3 indicate, for protection from the advancing Assyrian armies, Israel relied upon her alliance with Syria and her buffer zones east of the Jordan River—but they all collapsed before the invading Assyrians.

Verse 1 speaks of the fall of Israel's ally, the nation of Syria: *“Look! Damascus will no longer be a city, but will become a heap of ruins!”* Damascus, the capitol of Syria, had been conquered and devastated by the Assyrians, such had become

the fate of Israel's ally upon whom she relied for security and victory. Verse 2 speaks of the conquest of the buffer states east of the Jordan River: *"The cities of Aroer will be deserted; they will be left to flocks that will lie down there, with no one to make them afraid."* This territory was located east of the Jordan River, it had served as a protective buffer zone for Israel but had now been reduced to a desolate wilderness by the advancing Assyrian armies.

As we are informed about the state of Israel and its ungodly attitude, we must ask ourselves: Do we believe that as a nation we can protect our wealth and tranquility by building strong alliances with friendly nations and thus be protected from hostile military powers while we enjoy our abundance in hedonistic pleasure and self-contentment? Do we place our trust for defense and security in military technology and ability instead of placing our confidence in the LORD? We would do well to acknowledge such Scriptures as the following:

No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. ¹⁷A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength, it cannot save. ¹⁸But the eyes of Jehovah are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his unfailing love. ¹⁹He will deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. (Psl. 33:16-19)

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. ⁴When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. ⁵Blessed is he whose Helper is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in Jehovah his God, ⁶the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—[Jehovah], who remains faithful forever. ⁷He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. (Psl. 146:3-7a)

Verses 10-11 describe Israel's carefully cultivated strategies and devices, using the imagery of carefully cultivating a garden full of exotic plants:

... you have forgotten the God who is your Savior, and have not remembered the Rock that is your refuge. Therefore, you have placed [in the soil] the choicest plants and have planted imported vines. ¹¹On the day you planted, you placed a hedge around these vines. In the morning you caused your seed to blossom; but the harvest will vanish on the day of grief and desperate sorrow! (Isa. 17:10-11)

Having planted "the choicest vines," all care was then taken to protect these "plants" with the hope that they would produce a wonderful harvest of fruit, namely the "fruit" of peace and security. Special care was taken to promote their growth, and these "little seedlings" of diplomacy and foreign alliances were blossoming with hope. But the anticipated harvest is worse than disappointing; it is a disaster. In the day of harvest the seedlings are nothing more than a heap of dead vines! The military and diplomatic efforts of Israel fail to provide the desired security from the advancing Assyrian invader. Do we find ourselves

doing the same thing as Old Testament Israel—placing our confidence in our nation’s diplomatic and military alliances as the source of our national security; placing our confidence in our own network of business relationships and portfolios as the source of our economic security?

Let us be careful that we do not forget the LORD, and rely upon our own devices. Let us consider the counsel that the LORD gives us through the prophet Jeremiah, let us take that counsel to heart and build our lives upon it:

This is what Jehovah says, “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from Jehovah. ⁶He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. But blessed is the man who trusts in Jehovah, whose confidence is in him. ⁸He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” (Jer. 17:5-8)

III. Don’t Forget the LORD, ...Because He Alone Can Save You (Isa. 17:13-14)

The mighty army of Assyria, whom Israel feared and against whom she took every human precaution, is described as a raging river that has flooded its banks and is sweeping away everything that lies in its path: *“Oh, the uproar of multitudes of peoples! They roar like the roaring sea! And the raging of nations! They rage like the raging of mighty waters!”* (vs. 12.) The Assyrian army was, indeed, an instrument employed by the LORD Almighty to bring His inescapable judgment upon the sinful nations of the ancient Near East, note, again, Isaiah 10:5-6a, *“O Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my indignation! ⁶I will send him against a godless nation. I will commission him against a people who incite my wrath.”* Indeed, there is coming a day when the whole world shall have an inescapable encounter with the LORD God, when each and everyone shall be summoned to stand before His judgment seat; *“Jehovah ... is coming ... he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness; [he will judge] the peoples with his truth”* (Psl. 96:13.)

That awesome, irresistible instrument of divine judgment swept away all the pagan nations of the Near East, including the apostate nation of Israel: *“The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them ²³until Jehovah removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria”* (2 Kgs. 17:22-23.) None of Israel’s strategies or human resources could withstand the encounter with the LORD Almighty on His appointed day of judgment—executed in the form of the Assyrian invasion. In this regard, we may also take note of Zephaniah 1:18, *“Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of Jehovah’s wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world*

will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live on the earth." We must remember that none of the wealth we accumulate will be of any value on judgment day; it cannot buy us a pardon or gain us entrance into heaven; only the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ can benefit us on that day—we must entrust ourselves to Him today and rely upon His shed blood alone for our salvation.

That great tidal wave of divine judgment swept away all the nations, until it came to Judah. There it was miraculously halted at the command of the LORD—on behalf of those who cried out to Him for salvation. As Isaiah describes it, *"In the evening, look, there is terror! But before the morning dawns, they are gone"* (vs.14a)—*"they are gone"* is a reference to the swift and miraculous destruction of the Assyrian army. Verse 14 speaks of the LORD's miraculous deliverance of Judah because they had humbled themselves before the LORD and called upon Him for mercy and salvation, note Isaiah 37:1-7, 36-38,

When King Hezekiah heard this [the announcement that the Assyrians were at the gate], he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of Jehovah. ²He sent Eliakim, the palace administrator, Shebna, the secretary, and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. ³And they said to him, This is what Hezekiah says, "This is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace; it is like infants coming to the point of birth, but there is no strength to deliver them. ⁴Perhaps Jehovah your God will take note of the words of the [Assyrian] field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to defy the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words that Jehovah your God has heard. Therefore, lift up your prayer for the remnant [of Judah] that is still left." ⁵When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, ⁶Isaiah said to them, "This is what you shall report back to your master; This is what Jehovah says, 'Do not be afraid of the words you have heard, [the words] with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. ⁷Listen! I am going to put a spirit into him that will cause him, when he hears a certain report, to return to his own country. Furthermore, I will cause him to be killed with the sword in his own country..." ³⁶Then the angel of Jehovah went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When [the Assyrians] got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! ³⁷So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew [from Jerusalem]. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. ³⁸[One day,] as he was worshipping in the temple of Nisroch his god, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer assassinated him with the sword; then they escaped to the land of Ararat. Esarhadon his son succeeded him as king. (Isa. 37:1-7,36-38)

Let us not forget the LORD, because He alone can save us. The LORD Himself exhorts us, *"Look to me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none other"* (Isa. 45:22.) Speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostle Peter declares, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12.) If you have never

done so, entrust your life to Christ the Savior, trusting in His shed blood for the forgiveness of your sins. As a Christian, invest your life in serving Christ, instead of being pre-occupied with this present world that is destined for final judgment.

Conclusion

This is the message the Holy Spirit wants us to hear and heed from this passage of Scripture: Like Old Testament Israel, we are prone to forget the LORD, thinking that we can fend for ourselves. But, as the example of Old Testament Israel warns us, to attempt to do so is to court disaster. Let us not forget the LORD; on the contrary, let us put our trust in Him and live our lives for Him.