

ISAIAH

Chapter 31

Woe to Those Who Rely on Egypt

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD. ² Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words. He will rise up against the house of the wicked, against those who help evildoers. ³ But the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together. ⁴ This is what the LORD says to me: “As a lion growls, a great lion over his prey— and though a whole band of shepherds is called together against him, he is not frightened by their shouts or disturbed by their clamor— so the LORD Almighty will come down to do battle on Mount Zion and on its heights. ⁵ Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will ‘pass over’ it and will rescue it.” ⁶ Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites. ⁷ For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made. ⁸ “Assyria will fall by a sword that is not of man; a sword, not of mortals, will devour them. They will flee before the sword and their young men will be put to forced labor. ⁹ Their stronghold will fall because of terror; at sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic,” declares the LORD, whose fire is in Zion, whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

31:1 See 30:1 and note. Ch. 31 recapitulates ch. 30. (CSB)

Same Hebrew word is also translated “Ah” and is used repeatedly (e.g., 28:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 33:1) to strengthen the unity of this section, as it laments the death of Israel and Judah. Following on the heels of the second vineyard song (27:2–6; the first was 5:1–7), these woes echo the six woes of 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22, which themselves follow a vineyard song. (TLSB)

IN THE last chapter we heard in clear Words the prophet’s prophecy concerning victory over the king of the Assyrians. He proclaimed it to keep a fearful people in faith and steadfastness toward God. Here, then, the prophet continues exhorting the people by means of a similar persuasion, because he encourages them not once but many times, since the kings very frequently made alliances with each other. Besides, the chief task is to lead the frightened common people to faith and to keep them in it. Without having experienced them we do not know such fears as the people in the prophet’s time experienced. Therefore the common

people always began again to be afraid and to flee to men for refuge, and the prophet had an incessant concern for them. In this chapter he again threatens them not to seek foreign aid. Secondly, he offers the most beautiful promises. Thirdly, he threatens the downfall of the enemies. This is the gist of this chapter. Since everything is subject to change and daily rocks back and forth, there is need for encouragements. (Luther)

go down to Egypt. See Ge 26:2. (CSB)

horses ... chariots. Egypt had large numbers of horses and chariots (see 1Ki 10:28–29). (CSB)

Abundant in Egypt, known throughout the ancient Near East as the land for horses. Cf Ps 147:10. (TLSB)

This is rebuke. “You are sinning against the First Commandment. You do not trust in God.” They have confidence in creatures. (Luther)

The chief strength of the Egyptian army being represented by their cavalry, which boasted some very powerful war-chariots, and in horsemen. (Kretzmann)

Holy One of Israel. See 1:4 and note. (CSB)

You are sinning against the First Commandment. You can rely on horse and chariot but you cannot rely on God, who made you and the horse and the chariot and can destroy them. *Or consult the Lord*, that is, the ungodly are not influenced by any threats or promises. (Luther)

LORD – They sought human counsel, not divine. (TLSB)

The Lord is Jehovah, who had delivered them from Egypt when the army of Pharaoh pursued them to the Red Sea. He is the God of the covenant, the faithful Savior-God who keeps His promises, the God of free and faithful grace, who had chosen these people. (PBC)

31:2 *he too is wise.* People had questioned God’s wisdom in 29:14–16. (CSB)

The Lord’s words will make fools of the scheming politicians. (TLSB)

This is a threat. “In vain they rely on creatures, but they consider Me, God, a simpleton who has no help to offer.” So they cry out against the admonition of the prophet, and to them he replies, as if to say: “Listen and observe, your God is not a fool, but in a little while He will be wise enough for you.” (Luther)

CAN BRING DISASTER – That is, to the unbelievers. “When disaster comes, then you will know from experience with danger how wise I was. Then you will see Him whom you once called a simpleton.”

HE DOES NOT TAKE BACK HIS WORDS – God does what He says He will. (TLSB)

It may have been said concerning the prophet’s words then and there, because he said, “Stay with God and do not look for foreign aid.” And this Word of God spoken by the prophet is not set aside, he says. The same point is made in Jer. 23:14 ff.: “See now, whether I am right or whether you are right.” Or, this passage can be understood as referring to the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” (Luther)

WILL RISE UP AGAINST THE HOUSE OF THE WICKED – “Because they are not only unbelievers but also evildoers and blasphemers of the Word, I will destroy them.” (Luther)

31:3 EGYPTIANS ARE MEN AND NOT GOD – This is a highly significant axiom, which must be applied to all the sundry forms of confidence in creatures. This is so because all human and fleshly things are condemned by Scripture when it comes to relying on them. We should make use of them, not rely on them. Thus this proverb is opposed to every form of reliance on men, and it seeks to arouse faith in us in the greatest dangers. What are all dangers? They are vain and transitory. Why should you, a holy man, want to rely on them or fear them? Do not do it at all but trust only in God. What is an Egyptian? A man. What is man? A bubble that quickly bursts. “When his breath departs, he returns to his earth” (Ps. 146:4). (Luther)

stretches out his hand. Cf. the refrain in 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4. (CSB)

Refers to both the mighty salvation (Ex 6:6; Ac 4:30) and the mighty judgment of the Lord. The Lord had already stretched out His hand against Egypt (Ex 3:20; 7:5; Ps 138:7). He would stretch out His hand against Assyria (Is 10:5; 37) and against His people as well (2Ki 21:13; Jer 6:12; Ezk 6:14; Zep 1:4). (TLSB)

That is, when the Lord will bring the king of the Assyrians, He will destroy both the helper and the helped. “Cursed is the man who trusts in man” (Jer. 17:5), because he will tumble down. All Scripture speaks against this innermost ungodliness of the flesh because it is the source of every evil and most frequently takes us captive. You see that the whole world is nothing but a ruin because it goes about in this ungodliness and relies not on God but on men. (Luther)

Also refers to the mighty salvation of God. (TLSB)

helps will stumble. Cf. 30:3, 5. (CSB)

On both sides. Now follows a promise by way of a threat that rouses them from sleep. (Luther)

31:4 *lion*. A simile, but perhaps also an allusion to the Assyrian king (see note on 15:9). (CSB)

A lion cannot be scared away from his meal; nothing can scare the Lord away from Mount Zion. (TLSB)

These are magnificent promises for the godly. The Lord God compares Himself to a lion in protecting His own. For as a lion growls over his prey even in the midst of the shepherds and walks boldly about, so God says: “Strong and roaring in the midst of the prey (which you are), I will protect you.” For the lion does not flee, as if to say, “Just come and touch me with one finger. I am only one, you are many. Come and touch me. I defy you.” (Luther)

shepherds. Perhaps an allusion to the rulers of the nations (see NIV text note on Na 3:18). (CSB)

As lions do not fear shepherds, so God does not fear human leaders. (TLSB)

fight on Mount Zion ... its hill. God will defend His people; they need not ally with Egypt. Luther: “The lion does not flee, as if to say, ‘Just come and touch me with one finger. I am only one, you are many. Come and touch me. I defy you.’ So our God, though He is all alone, withstands all tyrants” (AE 16:271). (TLSB)

31:5 *birds ... will shield*. Cf. Dt 32:10–11. (CSB)

As mother birds spread their wings over their young to protect them, so the Lord will protect Jerusalem. (TLSB)

pass over. The technical word used of the destroying angel who “passed over” every house in Egypt that had blood on the doorposts (see Ex 12:13, 23). Cf. Isa 37:35. (CSB)

Another promise, in which God promises that He will protect them. *Hovering*, that is, with spread wings, as a hen protects her chicks with spread wings and menacing beak, so God will protect you, deliver you, and pass over you. This is a glorious promise: To protect and to deliver, to spare and to rescue. “Protecting and delivering you in the city, passing over you in the army of the Assyrians and scattering them, I will rescue you. I will pass among them as on the street.” (Luther)

31:6 *greatly revolted*. See 1:2 and note. (CSB)

Despite their sin, the people matter deeply to God, who longs for their repentance. (TLSB)

This is the conclusion. Turn from your presumption to the Lord Himself, who promises to protect you, because *you have deeply revolted*, as if to say: “In your desperation you have departed altogether too far from the Lord. Stay, trust in Him, because He will protect you.” (Luther)

Such sin and unbelief was not beyond the reach of God’s grace. (PBC)

31:7 IN THAT DAY – After this lion has protected you and you have learned by experience, you will then see that you did well to put your hope in the Lord. Then you will say: “Now I see that my endeavor was of no avail; only God helped me.” These things are idols that we cast away. For such presumptions as we depended on are idols like those of our work-righteous people. There follows a threat concerning the king that is to be made to fall. (Luther)

reject the idols. See 2:20 and note. (CSB)

31:8 *sword, not of mortals.* The angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 soldiers (see 37:36). (CSB)

God’s power, not a human weapon, defeats them. (TLSB)

As above by thunder through an angel, the Assyrian is struck down, a flash of lightning. *And he shall not escape from the face of the sword*, because the ungodly are terrified by a leaf in the wind, as by an army and they flee “when none pursues” (Lev. 26:36). *And his young men shall be put to forced labor.* This he says derisively to the Assyrians, as if to say: “Their young men are now proud and think that they will get away by running to their generals and their comrades, but I will prevent them from doing so. I will make them slaves that must pay tribute. They will not be jobless and victors but slaves and conquered.” (Luther)

put to forced labor. As prisoners of war. (CSB)

Captured soldiers often became slaves to compensate their enemy’s losses. (TLSB)

31:9 *stronghold.* Nineveh was destroyed by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C. (see Na 3:7). (CSB)

The Assyrian king and the god he trusts will prove to be deceptive quicksand when soldiers and officers panic and flee in terror. (TLSB)

Not only will the army itself run away, but even Sennacherib, the king himself, who is the rock and strength of the region, will flee. (Luther)

commanders will panic. Cf. Na 2:10. (CSB)

They flee from their military units in fear. (TLSB)

fire ... furnace. † The Lord's glory resides in Zion, and from there his fire of judgment breaks out upon the wicked (see 10:17; 30:33; cf. Lev 10:2; Joel 3:16; Am 1:2). (CSB)

Jerusalem (also called Ariel) was the home of burnt offerings sacrificed to the Lord. Because of this, the Lord will punish all those who threaten this place, including the Assyrians. (TLSB)

The Jews interpret this as referring to the temple, where the fire and the furnace are. I understand it simply thus: "I am the father of the family and I live in Jerusalem." Both in the Hebrew and in the German idiom the furnace, or hearth, points to the family and the domestic life, because houses are reckoned on the basis of hearths. (Luther)

Ch 31 The people of Jerusalem will find no help by going down to Egypt. Only the Lord of hosts will protect and deliver Jerusalem. Today, when we rely on earthly relationships in place of the Lord, we will sinfully stumble and fall. In Jesus, we have a helper who has perished for our iniquity. By the death and resurrection of His Son, God has stretched out His hand to deliver and rescue us from the fire of hell. • Holy Lord, teach us to look to You in times of trouble. Help us to cast away every idol that would lay claim to the trust we rightfully owe You. In Jesus' name. Amen. (TLSB)