

Notes on Isaiah 31-32

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This section has many parallels with Isaiah 29:1-14. Chapter 31 opens with the fifth of six woes in 28-35, in the NIV or six “ah’s” in the ESV. Some go down to Egypt for help (v.1) and the Lord comes down (v.4) to Mount Zion to do his work.

31:1 Isaiah keeps up the theme that trust in Egypt is evil. Faith hopes for what is not seen, (Hebrews 11:1). The thinking of man who has no thought of God, is to rely on what he can see. In this verse it is horses, chariots, and horsemen. Maybe when they came near the Lord in worship (in the sense of 29:13), with good words such as Psalms 33 & 76 (both of which mention horses), they sang truth which, nevertheless, did not affect them. In time of trouble, they would not choose the Lord but the horses of Egypt to be their savior.

The Same False Trust Isaiah speaks of relying on Egypt, not the Lord, in the face of the Assyrian threat. Ezekiel prophesied over a century later. The threat then was Babylon, but the trust was Egypt again. The King of Judah in Ezekiel’s day rebelled against the King of Babylon “*by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and a large army. Will he thrive? Can one escape who does such things? Can he break the covenant [made with the King of Babylon] and yet escape? ... Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company will not help him in war ...*” (Ezekiel 17:15-17)

31:2,3 It was the Lord who brought the Assyrian disaster (10:6). It was the Lord who promised the preservation of the throne of David. He does not take back his words. It is the Lord who will rise up against the help of the evil-doers of Egypt, because their help competes with his. These Egyptians are men and not God. God’s people failed to think of the Lord as God. Once the transcendent God faded in their thinking, their faith naturally sought other trusts – no matter how unworthy. When they lost the distinction between flesh and spirit; they were left with only flesh – in this case, horse flesh. God has no pleasure in the strength of a horse (Psalm 147); his delight is in those that fear him. By simply moving his hand, God can make the helper (Egypt) to stumble and the one seeking such help (Judah) to fall. True faith believes in One we cannot see (1 Peter 1:3-9).

31:4,5 Two animal illustrations For their sin, God fights against Mount Zion by using the Assyrians to chasten them. The Egyptians can no more prevent God doing that than a group of shepherds can frighten a lion growling over its prey. With the kind of abruptness we see in Isaiah (compare 29:5), the text turns to the Lord protecting his people. Punishment and protection can come together. (See 1:24-26.) Like birds hovering overhead, the Lord will shield and protect Jerusalem.

31:6-9 Not believing in such a wonderful Lord is a terrible sin, so Isaiah calls for repentance. A misdirected faith will always lead to terrible disappointment. Strong feeling against idols will come for all who trust false gods. “The Lord will be exalted in that day; the idols will totally disappear” (2:17,18). Isaiah probably means by “in that day” the Judgment Day. Then it will be horribly clear to idolaters that their idols are worthless. The appeal of the Bible is to turn from idols before their helplessness is evident to all the world in that great day when all shall see that only God is God (Philippians 2:9-11).

The deliverance from Assyria would not be one where any idol can claim credit. It would happen in such a plain way that Jerusalem will realize that it was the Lord alone who rescued them. The sword of man would not be allowed on this occasion to have even the appearance of saving them. The Savior is not mortal man but the living God. He used a disease to devour the Assyrian horde (10:16). Later, after whatever Assyrians still alive returned home, Assyria deteriorated till the day its young men became slaves of others. Their rock was their king who, at the walls of Jerusalem, did not crash into a stone wall but into the Rock of Israel (30:29) and was destroyed. He ran into the stone that causes men to stumble (8:14,15). He ran into Jesus Christ the Stone (1 Peter 2:8, 1 Corinthians 10:4). Christ, in protecting his people, made the mighty King of Assyria fall. Just as he hovered over Jerusalem to

save them from Assyria, he later offered his protective wings in his days on earth. But Jerusalem would not have it, so the rejected Lord left them unprotected to be overrun by a different horde, the army of the Romans (Luke 13:34).

The Assyrian defeat is one of terror because the Lord is in Zion and his fire is holy fire. Assyria approached the city where God had placed his Name and found there that the God of Israel is a consuming fire. The Lord who lived in Jerusalem is holy. As covenant keeper, God could be trusted to keep his promise; as holy, he would never approve of sin. Thus he is both a Savior of sinners and the danger to sinners still in their sin. The King of Assyria marched with blasphemous confidence into the consuming fire and learned truth about the God of Israel. Israel's God is the real God. No man on earth is safe from God unless his only hope is the Lord Jesus who for his people underwent the fire of divine wrath against our sin on the cross.

Isaiah 32

In 31:6-9 there were two judgments, the ultimate one at the end and the one near in time against Assyria. Two kings are also mentioned: one was the evil king of Assyria (31:9); the other is Christ, the good King to come (32:1). I will argue vigorously in my comments below on Isaiah 32:1 & 2 that this passage presents Christ as the promised shelter and shade. This chapter then turns to the transformation of the world itself. It shows the conduct of a people whose lives are radically changed when the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord (11:9). In his Word God often holds together what *is* with what *should be*, and then what *will be* when the Lord returns. (See 2:5 after the astounding prediction of 2:2-4!)

32:1 The Messianic King of chapters 9 & 11 will reign in righteousness, and so will the princes under him. This chapter does not dwell on the righteousness of his reign but in the resulting righteousness to be found in his subjects vv.3,4.

32:2 How this is translated obviously affects whether it speaks of the one man, Christ as the shelter and shade, or other men as well – such as the princes of v.1. We may say, “A man would be wise to do this.” When we speak that way, we do not have one person in mind. But while it is possible in the grammar of 32:2 to speak of “each man” without having a specific soul in mind, Isaiah 32:1 is describing a king in the singular. I say the text has in mind one king, Christ. The prophet is not speaking of a number of men in v.2. He spoke of a king and then of a man to describe him further. Would Isaiah really say that a number of men are each a shelter and refuge, when the Bible presents only the Lord himself that way? So I urge this understanding: Isaiah spoke first of “a king” (v.1) with princes under him. Then he spoke of this great king with the righteous rule as “a man,” referring only to Christ. Please note that those who translate 32:1, 2 have not denied that Christ is in view in v.1. No one in history fulfills v.1 but Christ.

Other weighty reasons to say “a man” as in the KJV for v.2 rather than “each man” referring to multiple persons:

- 1) In chapter 4 it is very clear that the overarching glory is the shekinah presence of the Lord shading his people. In that context he is “a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain” (4:6). This should affect how we read chapter 32. But Isaiah 25 does the same thing! “For you have been a stronghold to the poor ... a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat” (25:4). Such is the clear language of Isaiah prior to the words of chapter 32.
- 2) The message of Isaiah in its early chapters relates to the throne and line of David, corrupted by his sons. Ahaz feared for his life and his city, ignoring the covenant with David, of which he was the chief beneficiary. In this context and at that time, the Lord promised the son of the virgin for the House of David in Isaiah 7, the son to assume the throne of David in chapter 9, the human shoot from the stump of Jesse in chapter 11. All of this and more points to the King of 32:1 being a man, the singular man of 32:2. It is nothing less than a crying shame (pardon my exaggeration) for us to lose the Isaiah 32 gem in its reference to Christ. To do so is like the expert who comes in when a movie is half over and has missed the early story line.

In other words, we should interpret Isaiah by reading Isaiah.

This picture of Christ as protector and provider comes as protection from the driving wind and water, and protection from the scorching heat of the sun. He supplies water to sustain life. Having such a King has positive results as the following verses show. Vv.1,2 should be seen this way. The Lord himself is a shelter and refuge from eternal danger brought on us by our sin. The danger to every sinner is the Lord God himself, because in his holy justice, he must reward our sin with death. But the Lord has become our saving Refuge, because in his grace God has provided Christ. Since Christ took the guilt and punishment of our sin, we have in him full forgiveness and shelter from the wrath of God. Apart from Christ that wrath would be upon us. Christ, and only Christ, is our Shelter and Shade.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism holds to a sense of shelter and shade in the ministry of Christ that fits 32:1,2 well:

Q. 26. How does Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executes the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.

32:3-5 The reign of Christ will bring about change in those who enjoy his reign. These changes are perception (eyes), reception (ears), grasp of truth (mind), and communication of it (tongue). Blindness to God's truth (6:10; 29:9,10) will be removed. His people will no longer be rash; they will not talk without knowledge. No longer will fools be admired.

32:6-8 The future day will have no fools, but till then they are still with us. Isaiah describes in vv.6,7 how godless men speak and of the ruin they bring to others. They teach error concerning the Lord. We must beware of false teachers. (See Acts 20:29-31; all of 2 Peter and Jude; Philippians 3; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 2 Timothy 3-4:5; 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, and Galatians). False teachers are noted for immoral lives and deceit. Following them brings emptiness, dissatisfaction, and destruction. This is a powerful Scripture to show us that doctrine is important. False doctrine and ungodly conduct are the devil's trade. This must be answered by truth proclaimed and godly lives. When this is so, the quality of a noble man will be revealed. The wicked will not stand in the judgment; his way will perish, (Psalm 1).

32:8 V.1 anticipates quality princes who will rule in justice. Christ has others ruling with him (Revelation 3:21). The righteousness of the right King results in righteousness in those allied with him. So v.8 announces that noble colleagues (of Christ) will plan noble things. In v.15 we will see that the Spirit is poured out. That Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9), Who will produce the character of Christ in his people.

32:9-14 Isaiah addresses different segments of society from prophets to priests to old and young. Here he speaks again, as in chapter 3, to complacent and selfish women. A failure to take serious things seriously is a sin. These women feel secure because they do not believe the prophet's warning and cannot sense the famine that is coming. But the trouble is worse than a crop failure; the fields that produce the grapes will be overrun and the city itself will be deserted. Since Jerusalem did not fall to Assyria, Isaiah refers in this paragraph to the later Babylonian captivity when the people of Jerusalem would go into captivity. Then the animals could move in and live where people used to live. Unaware of all this, the women were confident of good times, but it was a false confidence. The stripping of clothes here probably refers to being taken as slaves.

32:15-18 Another great blessing is still ahead for God's people. God will pour out his Spirit upon those who are truly his people. Vv.6-14 show how bad it can be among the covenant people. God cannot be defeated in accomplishing his purposes. To bring righteousness among us, he had to send Christ, our Refuge from wrath, the Redeemer of his people from their sin. This same chapter promises the other great *sending*, the sending of the Holy Spirit. The language used is "pouring" because the Spirit's work of bringing life is sometimes compared to water poured on dry ground (44:3,4).

Just as water brings life to plants in desert and forest, the Holy Spirit will bring justice, righteousness, and peace, the opposite of the disaster in vv.9-14. No longer is the new earth under a curse but blessing. The gospel is of salvation by resting in God's promise (30:15). The Spirit produces righteousness in God's people and that brings

peace, quietness and confidence. In the new earth there will be no more war or conflict. The prophecy is not intended to inform us of what our houses will be like, but of peaceful life undisturbed by any external threat or internal sin. In the future kingdom of the Righteous King, Who pours his Spirit upon his own (Acts 2:33) there will be no threat to peace and righteousness.

32:19,20 The section ends with an epilogue. The world shall experience the wrath of God, shown by a destroyed forest and a leveled city. That judgment is real and is ahead for all who will not believe. The other experience is of the peace and happy fulfillment of one who can go about his business in safety. He is blessed and thus not under wrath. Even his animals live in security and without fear.

The Work of the Spirit We should note that the Spirit is *poured out*. Water is used a number of times as a way to describe the giving of life. Everyone born of the Spirit is born of water (John 3:1-8). The new life is like water on dry ground; nothing can live without new life from the Spirit. (Ezekiel 36:25-27). Christ's work on the cross is outside us, but no one would ever believe in him unless born of the Spirit, (John 1:13). Our salvation depends on a work entirely outside us (Christ's finished work on the cross), and entirely on a work in us (the Holy Spirit's continuing work). The Spirit is from "on high", (heaven), a point emphasized in Luke 24:49 and Acts 2:33. Since Christ and the Father sent the Spirit, it was essential that our Lord should first ascend to heaven. John baptized with water, but Jesus would baptize with the Spirit (Matthew 3:11), whom he poured out from heaven on his church on the Day of Pentecost. (See Acts 10:44-48.)