

# Explore the Bible: God Protects

September 22, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for Oct. 11 focuses on Isaiah 31:1-9*

The historical background for most of Isaiah's first part (chapters 1-39) is the growing threat of the Assyrian empire. Located northeast of Israel, the Assyrians were growing rapidly in wealth, size and military power at the time Isaiah 1-39 originally was written.

The Assyrians wiped out the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. Assyria crushed the kingdom and sacked their capital city of Samaria before dragging the citizens into exile and spreading them out across the Middle East. To this day the 10 tribes of Israel's Northern Kingdom are called the "lost tribes" because of Assyria's actions.

Isaiah and other prophets interpreted Assyria's conquest of Israel as God's punishment for the nation's idolatry and social injustice. Isaiah also warns the Southern Kingdom, Judah, that God will use Assyria against them if they persist in their own rebellion. This provides the context for Isaiah's words in our passage today.

## **"Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help ..."**

Judah, fearing the enormous threat of the Assyrian empire, was unsure of how to defend itself against the foreign invaders. In an act of desperation, the Judeans formed an alliance with their ancient enemy: Egypt.

Egypt was a major power in the ancient Near East and was one of the only nations—if not *the* only nation—that stood a chance against Assyria in

head-on warfare. Despite the historic enmity between their people, Judah decided to unite with Egypt against their common foe, the Assyrians.

But in Isaiah 31, the prophet declares this alliance futile. “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” (31:1).

Isaiah contrasts the Egyptians with Almighty God, saying, “But the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit” (31:3a). Isaiah’s point is simple: Egypt, powerful though it is, is only a human kingdom. It is not invincible or immortal. The Egyptians cannot save Judah, but God can.

## **The Lion of Judah**

In verses 4 and 5, Isaiah uses a pair of animal similes to describe God’s power as Judah’s protector. He compares the Lord to a lion—a common image of strength in the ancient Near East and a popular image for God in the Bible (31:4). Isaiah then compares God to birds, saying that “he will shield it and deliver it, he will ‘pass over’ it and will rescue it” (31:5).

The prophet follows this animal imagery with a call to repentance. Isaiah calls the people to return “to the One you have so you have so greatly revolted against” (31:6). In addition to committing idolatry and oppressing the poor of the nation, the Judeans have revolted against the Lord by seeking Egypt’s help instead of his.

Isaiah concludes with a brief oracle against Assyria. God will destroy Assyria. When the empire crumbles, it will not be because of human strength (31:8) but because God himself has decreed their destruction.

We know from history that God kept his word. Even though the Assyrian

empire besieged Jerusalem, they failed to conquer the city (2 Kings 18; Isaiah 36-37). Eventually, the Assyrian empire would crumble and be replaced by the Babylonian empire. Despite Assyria's seeming unconquerable might, they could not stand against the Lord of Zion.

## **Contemporary Application**

Just like the Judeans, we Christians can and should trust in God for our safety. God has secured eternal victory through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ, who one day will return to judge the living and the dead before making all things right. As such, Christians have nothing to fear from any earthly power.

Sadly, we often still find ourselves falling into the same trap as the Judeans. Despite having plenty of reason to trust God, the Judeans instead went to Egypt for help. Christians today often make this same error.

One of the most pronounced ways in which modern American Christians fail like this is by putting our trust in politicians to protect us. While Christians can and should vote, we should never assume we need elected officials to protect us. God needs no help from the president, Congress or the Supreme Court. No earthly ruler can re-kill Christ or destroy Christ's church.

If we American Christians trust earthly rulers to protect us instead of God, we repeat the sin Isaiah condemns in today's text. And if we compromise our Christian convictions to secure political victory, we are doubly condemned.

As you know, a major election is coming in November. I will not tell you for whom you should vote, but I will say this: do not walk into that voting booth thinking that you need the person for whom you are voting to protect you. God and God alone is your protector. Even if your candidate loses, God

remains sovereign, and Christ remains on his throne.

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