



God Protects

God is able to protect His people from enemies.

ISAIAH 31:1-9

Gold requires fire to be refined and purified. Melting the ore provides a means for separating the gold from other elements included in the raw material. The process also serves as a means for testing the gold. We too must face some type of fire for our faith to be tested, refined, and purified. This fire can come in all kinds of shapes and forms. For the Israelites, the threat of war served as a test of their faith, revealing their true character.

How does a crisis reveal a person's true character and beliefs? Why does a crisis bring out the best and worst in a person?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ISAIAH 28:1–33:24

Much of this section is interspersed with messages of judgment and hope. The messages of judgment begin with the word “woe.” “Woe” is an exclamation denoting an intense outburst of pain, grief, indignation, and alarm. When the prophets used this type of message, it was usually accompanied by an accusation or threat immediately followed by an announcement of judgment. The main focus of the woes in this section was the self-confident people of Judah. They needed to learn from what God was going to do to their rebellious brothers in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was going to send the Assyrians against Samaria, Israel’s capital (Isa. 28:1-7). Isaiah warned Jerusalem’s leaders to realize their sense of invulnerability was false because their covenant with foreign rulers and false gods would lead to disaster unless they returned to the Lord (28:14-29).

The Assyrians would be God’s tools to carry out His judgment against His people; they would lay siege to Jerusalem. But God promised to defeat the enemy, and in chapter 29 Isaiah foretold a future restoration of God’s people.

In chapters 30–31, the prophet warned of the consequences of seeking an alliance with Egypt instead of looking to the Lord for deliverance from their enemies. Their failure to trust in the Lord would only lead to defeat and humiliation. Only their repentance and faith in God could save them. If they would humble themselves before God in repentance and faith, not only would He save them but also give them direction, bless their land, and prosper them. Moreover, they would witness God’s glory as He defeated their enemies and put an end to the Assyrian threat. Finally, Isaiah pointed to the coming reign of the Messiah and the pouring out of the Spirit on the people in the far future. However, the immediate future for the people of God would be difficult, except for the righteous who will experience security and prosperity under their divine King (chaps. 32–33).

As you read Isaiah 31:1-9, look for what happens when the people of God turn to others instead of the Lord for help. How should a person’s trust in God be seen in all areas of life?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

FALSE HOPE (ISA. 31:1-3)

¹ Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and who depend on horses! They trust in the abundance of chariots and in the large number of horsemen. They do not look to the Holy One of Israel and they do not seek the LORD. ² But he also is wise and brings disaster. He does not go back on what he says; he will rise up against the house of the wicked and against the allies of evildoers. ³ Egyptians are men, not God; their horses are flesh, not spirit. When the LORD raises his hand to strike, the helper will stumble and the one who is helped will fall; both will perish together.

VERSE 1

In Isaiah 30:1-5, the prophet denounced Judah for turning to Egypt to save them from the invading Assyrians. Here, he warned them a second time about turning to Egypt for help. The first denouncement focused on Judah's rebellion against God by turning to Egypt, but this one focuses more on their lack of trust in the Lord. The people of Judah should grieve over the fact that their leaders had rejected the Lord and turned to Egypt for aid. The expression *go down* carries the idea of repeated activity. It is like saying, "We go down to the grocery store every Saturday." The leaders of Judah were repeatedly looking to human resources like those in Egypt to save them.

What did they see in Egypt? They saw an impressive military force made up of multitudes of horses and chariots, readied for war against the invading Assyrians. Judah's army was basically all infantry; therefore, the speed of cavalry and chariots logically seemed to be a big improvement to Judah's military forces. *Horses* would bring them speed, *chariots* would provide them with strength, and *horsemen* would give them trained warriors. The Judean leaders chose to disobey God's law that stated their kings should not acquire horses from Egypt (Deut. 17:16). What's more, they should have listened to Isaiah's prophecy that the Assyrians would defeat the Egyptians and take them into exile (Isa. 20:2-6). They should have known that trusting in Egypt to save them was a foolish mistake. The Judean leaders relied more on what they saw in Egypt than what they heard from the Lord's prophet. Furthermore, they saw what they wanted to see instead of what Isaiah told them

to see. If Judah looked to the Holy One of Israel, they would have seen their only true Protector and would have sought Him.

Why is it so tempting to look to something or someone else besides the Lord for help?

BIBLE SKILL: *Review earlier passages for context.*

Review Deuteronomy 17:14-20, noting the expectations for the king. Compare the expectations communicated in Deuteronomy with what you find in Isaiah 31. Which expectations were met and which were not? What does this passage tell us about the need for a better King? How does Jesus fulfill that need?

VERSES 2-3

Any attempt to get help from Egypt was futile because the Lord ***is wise and brings disaster*** on His enemies. By looking to others, the Judean leaders not only called into question the power of God but also His wisdom. What they did was offensive to God. Unlike the leaders of Judah who had treacherously disobeyed the Lord by going to Egypt for help, and unlike the Egyptians who could only be depended upon to look out for their own self-interests, the Lord ***does not go back on what he says***. Regarding Judah, what God said He was going to do was grim. Judah’s attempt to get help from Egypt would backfire, and God would rise up against the wicked Judeans and anyone such as Egypt who would lend them assistance.

Next, Isaiah pointed out a stark contrast between the Egyptians and the Lord. Man is frail, temporal, and mortal. The Lord is the Creator, the Eternal God, holy, and awesome in power. Horses are

mere flesh and blood, but the Spirit of God is divine, omnipotent, and eternal. Therefore, when the Lord *raises his hand to strike*, the *helper* and those *helped* will perish together. Judah's snubbing of the Lord and looking to Egypt was an insult to Yahweh their God. The monumental collapse Isaiah prophesied would be the consequence of Judah's refusal to trust in the Lord.

TRUE FAITHFULNESS (ISA. 31:4-5)

⁴ For this is what the LORD said to me: As a lion or young lion growls over its prey when a band of shepherds is called out against it, and is not terrified by their shouting or subdued by their noise, so the LORD of Armies will come down to fight on Mount Zion and on its hill.

⁵ Like hovering birds, so the LORD of Armies will protect Jerusalem; by protecting it, he will rescue it; by passing over it, he will deliver it.

VERSE 4

Isaiah reminded his audience that he was the Lord's messenger. His words were God's words. God's word to His people was the promise that He would protect Jerusalem and prohibit the Assyrians from having total victory over Judah—even though Judah had been rebellious.

The promise began with the picture of a *young lion* growling over its prey. The youthfulness of the lion depicts its strength and aggressiveness as opposed to an old lion that is pleased to let his pride hunt for him. A lion *growls* or roars for a number of reasons, but often it is to warn others to stay away from what is his or they will regret it. Lions invest a lot of energy into hunting their prey. When they catch their prey, they are not likely to give it up.

The word *shepherds* in the Old Testament often is a reference to kings. Isaiah was saying that when the king of Assyria and the kings of its vassal nations come against *Mount Zion* (Jerusalem), they will be unable to intimidate the Lord as He fights for Jerusalem. Additionally, God would not allow His people to be manipulated by the Pharaoh of Egypt. The blustering and clamoring of these shepherds would just be *noise* to God. As a young lion set to fight to protect its prey, the Lord was prepared to fight those coming to take Jerusalem. Though the leaders of Judah disregarded the Lord and went down to Egypt to look for help (see v. 1), *the LORD of Armies* would *come down* to fight for His people.

DID YOU KNOW?

“Mount Zion” (Isa. 31:4) is a poetic name for Jerusalem and specifically designates the area where the temple stood (see Isa. 2:3). The first biblical mention of Zion occurs in 2 Samuel 5:6-9. Although a specific place, Zion also became a symbol of God’s presence and rule.

VERSE 5

Continuing the picture of God’s protection, Isaiah compared the Lord’s protection of Jerusalem to *hovering birds* protecting their babies. This picture of God’s tender care is common in the Old Testament. (See Pss. 17:8; 61:4; 91:4.) God would protect Jerusalem by covering it and would spare it by passing over it. Isaiah chose a familiar expression associated with Passover and the Exodus to make his point. The words *passing over* describe what God did when He executed the tenth plague on Egypt and “passed over” the children of Israel who had blood on their doorposts in Exodus 12. Now, He was promising to spare them again.

Verses 4-5 form a complete picture of how God would save Jerusalem. The young lion emphasizes God’s power. The hovering birds protecting their young highlights God’s tender care. God would not only zealously save His people, He would protect His children with merciful compassion. The foolishness of Judah, the arrogance of Egypt, and the fierceness of Assyria could not stop Him.

How can one explain the display of God’s judgment and God’s mercy happening at the same? What is the significance of God’s unwavering faithfulness to believers when they are sometimes not faithful to Him?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God is fatherly in His attitude toward all men (Heb. 12:9).

REPENTANCE DEMONSTRATED (ISA. 31:6-9)

⁶ Return to the one the Israelites have greatly rebelled against.

⁷ For on that day, every one of you will reject the silver and gold idols that your own hands have sinfully made. ⁸ Then Assyria will fall, but not by human sword; a sword will devour him, but not one made by man. He will flee from the sword; his young men will be put to forced labor. ⁹ His rock will pass away because of fear, and his officers will be afraid because of the signal flag. This is the LORD's declaration — whose fire is in Zion and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

VERSES 6-7

On the basis of God's promised deliverance, Isaiah challenged the people of Judah to repent and turn back to the Lord. Even though they had sinned against God, He was ready to forgive and welcome any who would turn back and place their trust in Him. Note that their repentance was not a prerequisite for God's protection of Jerusalem. Instead, their turning back to God should be in response to God's wonderful and compassionate deeds of mercy. God would spare and save them in order to motivate them to respond with grateful repentance.

Accordingly, this was the people of Judah's moment of decision. Even though they had *greatly rebelled* against the Lord, He was prepared to forgive their sin. *On that day*, the day of the Lord when He comes in power and glory and establishes His throne on Mount Zion, He will destroy all wickedness and pride (Isa. 2:1-22). However, for Isaiah's audience it would be too late. Therefore, Isaiah's urgent message was the Judean's need to repent while they had the opportunity to do so. There will come a day when everyone will reject their gods and recognize the Lord alone is God and that there is no other. The apostle Paul spoke of this day in Philippians 2:9-11. Nevertheless, when that day comes, it will be too late for those who trusted in idols and failed to turn to God. Isaiah's message is reminiscent of what God proclaimed on Mount Sinai when He gave the Ten Commandments: "The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:6-7).

VERSES 8-9

Isaiah's message was straightforward: God Himself would defeat the Assyrians. Judah thought it needed the horses, chariots, and trained horsemen of Egypt to save them, but God needed no help. Judah would realize the grave mistake they made in turning to Egypt for help instead of the Lord.

Isaiah described the defeat of Assyria. Many would be slain, many would flee, and many would be put to forced labor. While there is no record of Assyrians having been put into forced labor by Judah, the statement is a picture of Assyria's complete rout. In 701 BC, King Sennacherib of Assyria invaded Judah and captured all of its cities except Jerusalem. Sennacherib recorded the invasion on a stele (a monumental commemorative stone or pillar) called Sennacherib's Stele. Second Kings 18:13–19:37, 2 Chronicles 32:21–22, and Isaiah 37:36–38 each describe what happened as Sennacherib laid siege on Jerusalem. In the night, the angel of the Lord struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrians, causing Sennacherib, probably the **rock** in verse 9, to return home to Nineveh in **fear** and disgrace. The rock who was the shelter and protector of this seemingly unconquerable empire fled before Almighty God. When the Lord raised His banner, the Assyrians who survived ran for their lives. Furthermore, shortly after his return to Nineveh, two of Sennacherib's sons assassinated him. The prophet Nahum foretold in vivid detail the fall of Nineveh which occurred in 612 BC. By the end of 605 BC, Assyria was no more.

The end of verse 9 recognizes that whatever the Lord declares will happen will indeed come to pass. The fire of the wrath of God would burn against all who questioned His glory and sought to destroy His people. Such a display proves the wisdom of those who put their trust in God.

What does Isaiah's message communicate about God's love for His people?

APPLY THE TEXT

- Trusting in human strength rather than God’s power will ultimately lead to defeat.
- God remains faithful even when we are not.
- Trusting in God will ultimately lead to victory.

Ask God to reveal to you things you trust other than Him for your security. What changes do you need to make as a result of what He tells you?

Reflect on times in your life when you were not faithful to God yet He remained faithful to His promises. Take time to thank Him for His faithfulness. With whom can you share about God’s faithfulness?

As a group, memorize Isaiah 30:18. Discuss what it means to wait on God. What makes waiting on God such a challenge and a test of our faith? How can the group help each other better wait on God?

PRAYER NEEDS
