

Isaiah 7:15–8:10 — The Near and the Far

Two Prophecies Running Together, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and Emmanuel's Land

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:15–8:10

“Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil and to choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil and to choose the good, the land whose two kings thou fearest shall be forsaken of both her kings.

Jehovah will bring upon thee and upon thy people and upon thy father's house days which have not come since the day when Ephraim turned away from Judah—even the king of Assyria.

Moreover the Lord said unto me, Take thee a great roll, and write thereon with a man's pen concerning Maher-shalal-hash-baz. And I took unto me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah.

And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bare a son. Then said the Lord to me, Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz. For before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father and my mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria.

Forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly, and rejoice in Rezin and Remaliah's son; therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria and all his glory. And he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks, and he shall pass through Judah, he

shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck. And the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel.

Take counsel together, and it shall come to naught; speak the word, and it shall not stand, for God is with us.”

Two Prophecies Running Together

The passage from verse 14 through 16 contains two things that run together but must be kept distinct. Verse 14 is a long-range prophecy: the virgin’s child, fulfilled in the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, confirmed unmistakably by Matthew 1:22–23 as fulfillment, not application. Verses 15 and 16 have a different and near reference — the time within which the two threatening kings would be removed. The question is where the break falls: does verse 15 belong with 14, or with 16?

The phrase “know to refuse the evil and choose the good” appears in both verse 15 and verse 16, and that repetition binds those two verses together. The stronger case is therefore to let verse 14 stand on its own as the far prophecy — Immanuel, the virgin’s child — and to read verses 15 and 16 as the near reference, connected with Isaiah’s own child and the short time within which Damascus and Samaria would fall. This is consistent with the general character of Old Testament prophecy, where a near event and a far event can stand in the same passage, the near one serving as a pledge and foretaste of the far one.

A parallel from Isaiah 61 is instructive. When the Lord Jesus stood in the synagogue at Nazareth and read from Isaiah 61, he stopped in the middle of a verse — “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” — and closed the book. He did not read the next clause: “and the day of vengeance of our God.” That break was just as abrupt as the one in Isaiah 7. To this present day the acceptable year continues; the day of vengeance has not yet come. The shift of subject within a single verse is not without precedent in Isaiah.

Knowing to Refuse Evil and Choose Good

The capacity to refuse the evil and choose the good is presented in these verses as something to be learned — acquired through experience. This is appropriate to the near reference, where the circumstances of God's governmental dealing teach a moral lesson. It is not appropriate to Immanuel. The holy thing born of the virgin did not need to learn the difference between good and evil — he was holy. He was the standard of good itself. In him, as Luke says, was the perfection of manhood: "that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." The word holy in that verse, with respect to his manhood, means that the humanity he took was untouched by sin from its very inception.

In a world where good is called evil and evil good, where the spirit of the age offers alibis for almost everything, the capacity to refuse evil and choose good has a real moral weight. Butter and honey — the reduced, simple diet of a land laid waste by the Assyrian — was the environment in which that lesson was to be learned. When everything that prosperity provided had been stripped away, the soul was left with fewer distractions from the plain question of what is good and what is evil. God's rod, in that sense, is always for our profit.

Maher-shalal-hash-baz: Swift for Spoil, Hasty for Prey

The first child of Isaiah mentioned in the book is Shear-jashub: a remnant shall return. That name implies captivity and departure, but it also implies mercy — a remnant will come back. The second child is given the extraordinary name Maher-shalal-hash-baz: swift for spoil, hasty for prey. The first name points toward mercy; the second toward swift judgment. Had they come in the opposite order, the impression would have been different. As it is, mercy precedes judgment in the order of Isaiah's children.

This child's name was first written on a great tablet with public witnesses — Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah — before his conception,

so that when the child was born and named, there could be no question of retrospective invention. Before this child would know to cry “my father” and “my mother,” the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria would be carried away before the king of Assyria. The time span is very short: within the first year or two of the child’s life. These are things that were historically fulfilled.

Was Mrs. Isaiah the virgin of chapter 7? The answer is no. The prophetess and Isaiah’s wife are what she was; the virgin of verse 14 is someone else entirely. The child of the prophetess is named Maher-shalal-hash-baz; the child of the virgin is named Immanuel. They are distinct prophecies, and they must be kept that way.

The Waters of Shiloah and the Waters of the River

Verse 6 of chapter 8 gives the real cause of the Assyrian invasion: “forasmuch as this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah that go softly.” Shiloah means that which is sent — it speaks of that which God provides, gently, quietly, for refreshment. The people rejected it and rejoiced instead in Rezin and Remaliah’s son — human power and alliance rather than God’s provision.

The contrast between the two kinds of water is deliberate. The waters of Shiloah go softly; they are gentle, sent of God. The waters of the river — the Euphrates, the Assyrian flood — are strong and many. He comes up over all his channels, over all his banks, overflowing and passing through Judah all the way to the neck. The very softness and gentleness of what God provided, which they despised, is replaced by the raging fury of what they get instead.

The waters of Shiloah also speak of Christ himself. He is the Word of God, the expression of the mind of God; in John 1, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. When he was here, a smoking flax he would not quench, a bruised reed he would not break. He went softly. The people refused that too. And the consequence of that final rejection is the overflowing scourge yet to

come, of which these chapters are a foreshadowing.

Emmanuel's Land

Verse 8 contains a remarkable phrase: “the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel.” The land is addressed as Emmanuel’s land. The Assyrian floods it; the waters reach to the neck. And yet the land is called by the name of God with us. God allows it to happen. The people deserved it. But the instrument that does it is still poking at the apple of God’s eye, trespassing on Emmanuel’s land. And woe to that instrument.

This is one reason why some have seen a reference not only to the Old Testament Assyrian but to the future king of the north in these verses — because in chapter 8 Emmanuel has already come and taken possession of his land in the language of the prophecy. The overflowing of verse 8 uses the same word as the “overflowing scourge” of later chapters, which clearly speaks of a future event. The two Assyrians, old and future, are related in character and in their relationship to Israel. The future one operates on the same policy of hatred toward God’s land.

Take Counsel Together, and It Shall Come to Naught

Against the confederacy of nations, the peoples who arm themselves and plan against Israel, the word of God stands unmoved: “Take counsel together, and it shall come to naught. Speak the word, and it shall not stand, for God is with us.” Immanuel — God with us — is the ground of everything. Their resource is in his presence with them. Whatever plans are laid against his land will ultimately come to nothing, because it is his land, and his name is God with us.

There is mercy woven through all the judgment in these chapters. Amid the briars and thorns that fill the land, a man shall nourish a young cow and two sheep and have butter and honey enough to eat. In the midst of the most thorough national

catastrophe, God finds a way to be merciful. As the hymn puts it: “With mercy and with judgment, my web of time he wove. ‘Mid the dews of sorrow were lustered with his love.” God always remembers mercy in wrath (Habakkuk 3:2).

The stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel.