

Beauties of the Truth

A Forum for the Publication of Scriptural Viewpoints
Thought to be Harmonious with God's Plan of the Ages
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Woe to the Spoiler

Isaiah 33-35

Bible Students have long appreciated the poetic and prophetic beauty of the 35th chapter of Isaiah. It is the chapter that speaks of the desert blossoming as the rose, the lame man leaping as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb singing. It describes the glories of restitution, resurrection, the highway of holiness, and the ransomed of the Lord returning from the grave. Brethren have come to appreciate all these beautiful truths as they provide an overview of that kingdom for which Christ taught us to pray. But there is a principle which applies whenever we study the scriptures. It is important to study in context, remembering that scripture is not given in isolated bits, here and there. For example, Isaiah 35:1 reads, "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose." A reasonable question to ask is, "what is it that provides gladness for the wilderness and solitary place?"

GLADNESS FOR WILD ANIMALS

To understand the meaning, it is essential to review the preceding context in chapter 34. Examining chapter 34 sees that the "them" refers to a group of wild animals that are devouring the landscape, the owl, the cormorant, the bittern and the raven. The wilderness and solitary place of chapter 35 are glad for these unusual animals.

But why would they elicit such gladness? Examining the general layout of the book of Isaiah may prove helpful. The book can be divided into three sections. Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of three kings of Israel. Chapters 1-6 take place during the reign of King Uzziah. Chapters 7-35 take place during the reign of King Ahaz. Chapter 36-66 occurred during the reign of King Hezekiah.

Chapter 34 and 35 are in the section written under King Ahaz and are called the woe chapters. They include a woe unto Babylon, woe unto Damascus, woe unto Assyria, woe unto Judah, and so forth. There are a series of some 15 woes in all. While studying Isaiah contextually, each woe must be studied separately, because each woe is a unit of prophecy tying into the larger scale of all the woes. Isaiah 35 belongs to the 15th, or final woe, and is part of

the last woe section which begins in chapter 33. Chapters 33 through 35 then make up the context of our prophecy on restitution. It begins with, "Woe to thee that spoileth, and thou wast not spoiled" (33:1). It does not give this woe to a specific country, but rather to an entity described by its actions, i.e. that which spoiled but was itself not spoiled.

In looking over the scheme of world events from our perspective at the end of the age, it may not be difficult to determine who this spoiler is. The systems that fit this description are the great antichristian systems that have spoiled God's people. Instead of facing retributive justice, they have seemingly gotten by with spoiling. In the 33rd chapter, there is a dialogue between God on the one side, and certain people, who are responsive to the Lord on the other side. It is a dialogue between God, proclaiming judgment upon the systems, and certain ones within the systems who are not supportive of the spoiler.

They are in the system but are responsive to the Lord. This dialogue encompasses the 33rd chapter. After the dialogue of chapter 33 comes the destruction of the spoiler in chapter 34, given in very graphic language. Following the destruction of chapter 34 comes the restitution described in chapter 35. It is the kingdom growing out of that which was first spoiled.

ISAIAH 33 — O LORD, BE GRACIOUS

Verse 1 continues saying, "when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled; and when thou shalt make an

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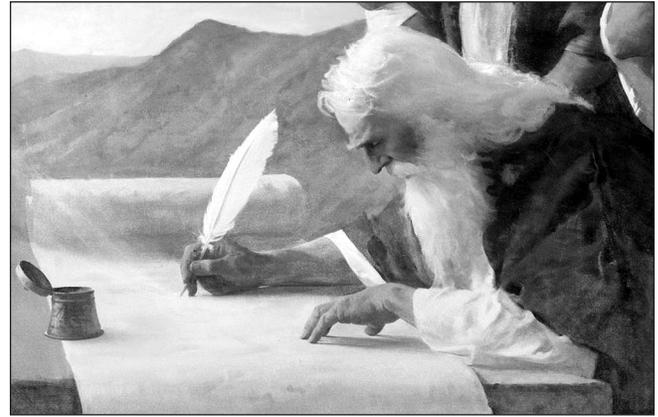
end to deal treacherously, they shall deal treacherously with thee.” This indicates that when the antichristian systems cease to be the oppressor of God’s people, then their punishment (their woe) would be meted out. During the Dark Ages, the tyranny of Papacy oppressed the saints with no apparent consequences for their evil. But now that system faces its judgment from God.

There is a similarity here with Revelation 18 where the saints are called to come out of a system, spoken of as Babylon the Great. Those in the system are instructed to leave lest they be partakers of her sins and receive of her plagues. Then the Revelator says, “Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled fill to her double” (Revelation 18:6). This speaks of the retribution upon Babylon, not during the age, but after the Lord has taken the majority of his people out. Now there must be retribution upon this system and it must collapse. This proclamation is parallel to what is prophesied in Isaiah 33:1.

We find that Isaiah 33:2 describes the Lord’s true people, who are within the system at the time this judgment is pronounced. They cry out, “O LORD, be gracious unto us. We have waited for thee. Be thou their arm every morning, our salvation in the time of trouble.” People who had been identified with Babylon, the same ones who are “my people” in Revelation 18, but who may not have come out at that point in time, are here asking the Lord to be gracious to them. They recognize that the system must fall but plead for mercy, desiring that God be their salvation in the time of trouble.

In verse 3 the people flee at the noise of tumult. This corresponds to Revelation 18:4, when the people of the Lord flee Babylon upon being called out. Then Isaiah describes the destroying agents which consume the spoiler, as grasshoppers and locusts. In Joel, the first and second chapters, the prophet talks about the Lord’s great army, describing it as an army of locusts coming upon them. With them are the palmer worm, the caterpillar and the grasshopper (Joel 2:25). They are the army of discontents, the army of dissatisfied ones who have seen the oppressions and are ready to tear down the oppressing system.

Verse 6 provides practical advice to those who desire peace during these troublous times. “And wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation: the fear of the LORD is his treasure.” To experience stability in this challenging time one must seek the wisdom and knowledge only the Lord can provide. Through study and meditation, one can understand that the events of our day have a wise and benevolent purpose. This process of judgment will result in the uplifting and blessing of mankind. That understanding provides stability, where trouble does not upset, and destruction does not challenge one’s faith. But those in the world who



Isaiah, the prophet

do not understand what is happening are distressed. This is described in verse 7. “Behold, their valiant ones shall cry without: the ambassadors of peace shall weep bitterly.”

For all the times in history that God’s name was defamed and credited with evil, then will come the time that his name will be exalted, as seen in verse 10. “Now will I rise, saith the LORD; now will I be exalted; now will I lift up myself.”

In verse 13, the Lord says, “Hear, ye that are far off, what I have done; and, ye that are near, acknowledge my might.” The Lord is here addressing two different groups. The “far-off” may refer to heathendom, those outside the pall of Christianity. As part of society, they are involved in the process as well. They have been meshing with an evil society. They will observe the Lord’s work of judging. But he expects more from the second group, those that are near. He instructs those who are closest to him to acknowledge his might and use this opportunity to show they stand for righteousness.

In verse 14, the “sinners of Zion” express fearfulness and surprise at the destruction. They ask, “who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?” The Lord answers, saying, “he that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; He shall dwell on high: his place of defense shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure” (verses 15,16). This suggests there are those within Christendom who will listen. There are still those who are “my people.” How well this corresponds to the council found in Zephaniah 2:3 “Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’s anger.”

Those desiring to please the Lord will show this by a humble character, walking uprightly and seeking righteousness. They will refuse to morally participate in a wicked system. They will not be part of the spoiler. In other words, even though they are still connected with the

system that brought oppression, they will dwell on high, and have part in the high calling and come to “see the king in his beauty” (verse 17). They will come to recognize that behind this trouble, there is the Great King Jehovah and his son, King Jesus.

Isaiah 33 describes the Lord’s woe against the system that spoiled his people but whose own spoiling was reserved for the Day of Judgment. It also prophetically relates the response by the Lord’s true people.

ISAIAH 34 — HEAVENS ROLLED TOGETHER

In the 34th chapter the prophet describes one aspect of the destruction of Christendom. “all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig tree. For my sword shall be bathed in heaven: behold, it shall come down upon Idumea, and upon the people of my curse, to judgment. The sword of the LORD is filled with blood, it is made fat with fatness, and with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams: for the LORD hath a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Idumea” (verses 4-6).

This is a statement of the destruction of Christendom. In an endeavor to save themselves, the various systems “roll together as a scroll.” But this action will not preserve them. The slaughter of lambs and goats describes the destruction of the tare class as well as those spirit begotten ones who remained in the systems until their collapse. These “sheep” will likely be part of the Great Company.

Following the destruction, the Lord invites wild beasts into the land, shown in verses 11 to 17. The setting is still in the land of Idumea, where the Lord had his great slaughter. In essence, he says, “This land is waste. Clean it up. Go through and eat what is left because it is now wilderness. I need this to be completely laid to the ground.”

There is a parallel sequence of events in Ezekiel chapters 38 and 39. They describe the great conflict against Israel at the very end of the time of trouble. The armies of the north, allied with the circling nations of Persia, Ethiopia, and Libya, come against Israel and against the competing force of Sheba, Dedan and the nations of Tarshish. Suddenly, the Lord steps in and fights for Israel.

After the Lord wins the victory, we come to Ezekiel 39:17-19. There, the Lord calls all the fowls of heaven to eat up the flesh of the mighty and drink the blood of the princes of the earth. This corresponds to the events in Isaiah 34. In the aftermath of trouble, the wild beasts come in and are told to clean up the mess. These wild beasts are the elements of the Lord’s Great Army that are left. They are the dissidents, the dissatisfied ones who come in and are glad for the demise of the systems. The remnants of any evil system will be removed after the greater conflicts of the time of trouble.

ISAIAH 34 — MANKIND’S HOPES

With the background of chapters 33 and 34, we come to chapter 35, the focus of our hopes. The wilderness and the solitary place will be glad for them, i.e. for the beasts of chapter 34; the bittern, the owl and the cormorant. They will be glad because of these unclean elements that have come in. They are glad because that which has preceded God’s kingdom was nothing but a counterfeit kingdom of oppression. That which preceded this kingdom has been that which oppressed the human race, drained its finances, and took away its liberties and freedoms. When this system falls, that which remains will rejoice. It was time for this evil land to be laid waste.

The wilderness and the solitary place are distinct from one another. The wilderness is identified in Ezekiel the 20th chapter as being the nation of Israel, that which has been in a wilderness condition. The Lord said, “I will bring you out from the people and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, into the wilderness of the people and there will I plead with them” (Ezekiel 20:33, 34). Those who are in this wilderness condition of natural Israel are one group that will rejoice in the fall of Christendom, which has been their oppressor all along.

The solitary place also rejoices. That lone individual, here and there, who has been in the system all along but would have no part of it, will rejoice in its removal, glad for what is happening.

BLINDNESS — SYMBOLIC AND LITERAL

Applying Isaiah 35 symbolically does not diminish its literal interpretation. This chapter is also a beautiful, literal prophecy of the earth coming back to perfection. The desert, the dried-up condition of men’s hearts, will rejoice under these new conditions. They will blossom as the rose. They will then produce character fruitage because there will be fertile ground, as the Lord begins to bring refreshing showers of truth. But the literal deserts of this world will rejoice as well because the Lord will send “streams in the desert” to bring it to life.



Streams in the Desert

Then the Lord gives instructions to, “strengthen ye the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees” (verse 3). The nations will learn the lesson of the permission of evil. They will grow strong in their ongoing disciplines of the kingdom and they will make straight paths for their feet. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart and the tongue of the dumb sing. Then, not only will literal blindness be healed, but the eyes of understanding will be opened. Then those ears, once deaf to truth and righteousness, will hear and obey. Those with no good word to say about the Lord and were once dumb, will sing aloud the praises of our God. That will come with the educational process of the kingdom. In their past wilderness condition, they were starved. There was a famine, not for bread, but for hearing the word of the Lord.

Then a highway shall be there. This is the same highway mentioned in Isaiah 19:23 as a highway from Egypt to Assyria with Israel situated between them. Israel will be a blessing in their midst. They will bring together the two polarized segments of society on a highway that will lead to holiness. The unclean will not pass over it, but it will be for their benefit, to lift them out of their foolish condition, and to reclaim them.

“No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast but the redeemed shall walk there” (verse 9). Satan, the lion, will be removed. All the ravenous beasts will be gone. This perhaps refers to the binding of the fallen angels, or even the sinful passions of men, the urge to do that which is wrong. Both will be restrained.

The redeemed, the purchased ones, shall walk there. They are the ransomed of the Lord. They shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

— Gleaned from a discourse by Br. Carl Hagensick

Hands of the Living God

The Apostle Paul in writing to the Hebrews resorted to figurative language when he referred to “the hands of the living God.” “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). As we ponder this expression, we wonder what prompted Paul to make this statement. The experience he had in the city of Athens, recorded in Acts 17, may have been instrumental in coining this phrase, “the hands of the living God.” In this experience the spirit of Paul was stirred when he saw that the entire city of Athens was devoted to idols. This caused him to rise to the occasion and deliver the remarkable sermon on Mars Hill, the subject being the Unknown God. In his sermon Paul made a contrast between the dead, lifeless gods of the Greeks, with the living God that Paul worshipped, whose hands moved and accomplished mighty things.



“Praying Hands,” Albrecht Durer, 1508

WONDERS OF THE HUMAN HAND

The scriptures make good use of human anatomy in providing some spiritual lessons. The Bible makes many references to the hand because it is so useful in life. It’s design, construction, and function have no equal in the engineering world. The human hand is perhaps the most versatile of all instruments that we know of. Each hand has 25 joints, permitting it to make 58 different motions. Each human hand contains 27 bones. Our two hands contain approximately 26% of all the bones in the body. Our fingertips contain the most densely packed group of nerves. In the construction of the hand the thumb is important. Having opposable thumbs gives us the ability to perform delicate operations, which would otherwise be impossible. The thumb performs 45% of the action of the hand. The human hand is powerful. A strong man can develop a grip of 120 pounds. The human hand can drive a nail with great force, yet that same hand can pick up a tiny needle. The great master designer built this wonderful body of ours. And all these components in the human body respond to a nerve center of our brains.

In the design of the human body, it was necessary for it to relate to the environment. Even the future had to be considered. For example, God foreknew that man would express his thoughts by speech and by writing. Therefore, the design of the hand would have to be in some ways the extension of the mind. What was going on in the mind would be extended by one’s hand. Human thoughts could

now be placed on paper. The instantaneous connection between our mind and our hands is truly amazing.

AN INSTRUMENT OF ACTION

The hand is an instrument of action. The hand can bless, it can give, and can be used to heal. The hand also conveys friendship, affection, and sympathy merely by touch. Hands can also produce audible sounds such as clapping to gain attention, or by knocking to gain entrance. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3:20).

All the arts of beauty and skill lie right in the palm of our hand. As we compare man’s beautiful hands to that of the paws, claws, and hooves of the lower creation, we can certainly recognize the superiority of the human hand. Not only in its construction, but also in its abilities. The hand also has the ability to speak a language. Those that have lost their speech can train their hands and fingers to convey a language. Sign language is a silent communication with one’s hands. Those who have lost their sight can train their hands to read for them by use of the braille system, only made possible by the feathered touch designed into the fingers which enables them to read.

Of course, the hand by itself would be useless if it were not connected to the brain. It is because of this miraculous connection that an artist can paint, a musician can play an instrument, a physician can heal, and a builder can build. Without this superb instrument responding to the brain, man would lose much. God designed us each with our own personalized set of fingerprints. This illustrates just how much he respects the identity of every individual.

In many ways, human hands become apt symbols of human action. For example, when we speak of pure hands, we mean pure motives. When we say that hands are unjust, we suggest the deeds of injustice. The washing of hands indicates innocence (Matthew 27:24).



Helping hands in every difficulty

Extending the right hand up is a method used in voting. When one takes an oath, the right hand is extended. The mark of friendship and fellowship is extended when we shake right hands. The creator has endowed his creation with two superb instruments.

THE HANDS OF GOD

When the scriptures speak of God’s hands, they are full of meaning. Only by understanding the capabilities of our human hands can we appreciate the statements made in the scriptures.

The prophet Isaiah asks, “Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and meted out heaven with a span?” (Isaiah 40:12). This picture of God holding the oceans in the hollow of his hand illustrates how very small we are. Isaiah also spoke of God’s measuring device. He measures the heavens with his span. This again is reminiscent of how small this planet is. We are but a speck in this immense universe which God easily measures with his span. Isaiah also likens all the nations of the earth to a drop of the bucket and dust on the balance of the scale (Isaiah 40:15). The imagery conveyed in these words tell us something of the grandeur of God.

The mighty hands of God are working hands. He is the maker and creator of all. In the Psalms 8, David speaks of God’s creative hands. He makes specific mention of God’s fingers, indicating creative works of a delicate nature. “When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him? Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands.” Our great universe is merely a work of God’s creative fingers. Produced by his divine energy, and delicately balanced to sustain life as we know it.

God’s hands are again featured by Isaiah as he likens them to the hands of an ancient potter. “O LORD, thou art our Father, we are the clay, thou art the potter, and we are the work of thy hands” (Isaiah 64:8). Isaiah is here conveying the relationship between the human race and their creator. By using the art of pottery, he is making a very forceful illustration of God’s complete mastery over creation. He is the one who decides what to create. And even though the clay of humanity became contaminated, he will use his hands to clean it up. He will use his hands to shape it into beautiful vessels, especially the beautiful vessels of the New Creation.

The human hand shows purpose. An image of a clenched fist conveys power and determination. People make plans and carry them out. They remove the obstacles to accomplish their purpose. The same is true of God on a much grander scale. Through the power of his hands God’s plan will not fail. He has intervened in human affairs when necessary, so his purposes would be accomplished. We remember how God used the power of his mighty hands to scatter those building the tower of



Moses in the cleft of the rock

Babel by confusing their language. Those same powerful hands overthrew the Egyptians in the Red sea. Even in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the same power was exercised in the smiting of the great image. And that same power will continue to be exercised until God completes his plan and establishes his wonderful kingdom on earth.

HANDS OF DELIVERANCE

God's mighty hands are also able to express his personal care for those who serve him. It was David who learned very early to lean on God's hand. He said, "My times are in thy hand, deliver me from the hand of mine enemy" (Psalm 31:15). From his early youth, David believed God. As a shepherd, he wandered the hills of Israel, seeking water and food for his flocks, and in the night watches he guarded his flocks beneath a star-studded sky. Through these experiences he learned to recognize and appreciate God's protective care.

In the checkered experiences of David's life, his thoughts were primarily about his own life. However, in a special way, David also spoke prophetically of the members of the church. When he said, "my times are in thy hand," he was speaking for every saint down through this age, the "times" spanning the years of ones consecrated life. As the Lord's people we have placed our interests, our talents, in his hands, to be active in the various opportunities that he presents. Being in His hands, then indicates His careful attention, and our training, development and preparation for a future exalted position. Recognizing the blessing of putting our time in God's hands brings great peace, and freedom from anxiety.

ENGRAVED IN THE PALMS OF HIS HANDS

The prophet Isaiah penned an unusual expression. "Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16). When something is engraved, such as a piece of jewelry, the effect goes deeper than the surface of the object. It cannot be erased. Being engraved on the palm of God's hand is significant because the palm is the protected area of the hand and the hand can be closed

around the object it wishes to protect or hide. In this verse God is talking about Israel. They are engraved in the palms of his hands. They will never be erased from God's memory. The preceding verse states that "Israel may forget, but I (God) will never forget." God promises to never forget them, and they will enjoy his protection. When they were on the verge of extermination, God simply closed his hand around them, and they were saved.

The time will soon come when God will open those protective hands over Israel and reveal the name of Israel etched there. Israel will then be an instrument in God's hand to bless the world of mankind. This beautiful illustration applies equally to spiritual Israel. The Lord has engraved the names of his children on the palms of his hands. Like natural Israel, the church is protected by the fingers of God and will be the instruments he uses to continue the work he has planned.

IN THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK

Exodus 33:17-22 records an extraordinary experience in the life of Moses. In answering his requests to see the glory of God, the Lord answered, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live!... Behold, there is a place by me, where you shall stand upon a rock; and while my glory passes I will put you in the cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." This must have been an awe-inspiring event for Moses. Just what Moses observed we are not told. But it was a demonstration of God's greatness. It was God's hand that shielded Moses from death. But this shield would only be effective if he stood in a designated area. He was to stand on a rock. The hymn writer alludes to this rock, writing "Rock of ages, cleft for me, I am hidden safe in thee, hidden here from all my foes, none can harm, though all oppose." This is the experience of every child of God. God's hand will only shield us if we take advantage of the safety that has been provided. We stand on him and him alone. "Thou art my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation" (Psalm 89:26).

UPON THE RIGHT THUMB

At the consecration of Israel's priesthood, Moses was instructed to place blood from the ram of consecration on the high priest's right ear, the right thumb and the right big toe. In general, the right side has the most strength and power. It is the side of highest favor. This was to indicate that the Lord wants our best, and strongest powers to serve him. We are to put him in the highest position of honor. Only by responding in full consecration can we reap the benefits of being used by God. The sacrifices it calls for and the commitment it requires is a small price to pay for the tremendous advantages of being engraved in the hand of our heavenly father.

— Gleaned from a discourse by Br. Edmund Jezuit

Sennacherib's Cylinder

"He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shields, nor cast a bank against it" (Isaiah 37:33).

Sennacherib's Cylinder is a six-sided clay tablet discovered by Colonial Robert Taylor in 1830. It was found in the ruins at Nineveh, capital city of the Assyrian Empire. Taylor's cylinder is presently found in the British Museum. Two additional prisms have been discovered. One is now in the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago while the third is housed at Israel's National Museum in Jerusalem. The inscriptions on each are almost identical, although the dates on the prisms show the Oriental Institute prism to be 16 months younger. These cylinders are among the finest archaeological specimens of their kind and their historical and Biblical significance are immense.

Containing 487 lines of very legible cuneiform text, they record eight military expeditions of Sennacherib, king of Assyria. Among them is his description of the siege of Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah. A translation of the complete text can be found in a book titled, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (University of Chicago Press, 1924).

The words of interest are found in lines eleven to twenty-one. Sennacherib says the following;

SENNACHERIB TEXT

11. "I fixed upon him. And of Hezekiah (king of the)
12. Jews, who had not submitted to my yoke,
13. forty-six of his fenced cities, and the strongholds and the smaller cities
14. which were round about them and which were without number,
15. by the battering rams, and by the attack of engines
16. and by the assaults of foot soldiers, and ..."
17. I besieged, I captured 200,150 people, small and great, male and female,
18. horses, and mules, and asses, and camels, and men,
19. and sheep innumerable from their midst I brought out, and
20. I reckoned (them) as spoil. Hezekiah himself like a caged bird within Jerusalem,
21. his royal city I shut in ..."

The historical record indicates that Sennacherib devastated the land of Israel. Much of what was written on the cylinder is confirmed by scripture.



Image from the palace of Sennacherib

2 Kings 18:13 says that he came up against all the fenced cities of Judah and took them. He then proceeded to Jerusalem and laid siege.

Prior to Sennacherib's arrival Hezekiah prepared for war by sealing all the water supplies. Hezekiah's tunnel was constructed to provide a secret water supply for Jerusalem. Originating outside the city walls at the Gihon Spring, the tunnel takes a winding course of some 1,748 feet, before reaching the Pool of Siloam. It was an engineering marvel as workers dug from opposite ends, meeting somewhere in the middle. 2 Kings 20:20 credits Hezekiah with its construction.

Upon the approach of Sennacherib's army Hezekiah was also dealing with a severe physical ailment. The words of Isaiah came as a shock to him. "Thus saith the LORD, 'Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live'" (2 Kings 20:1). This devastating news caused Hezekiah to pray earnestly. As a result, God made a double promise. Hezekiah's life would be extended 15 years and Jerusalem would be delivered.

The deliverance of the city was swift and decisive. "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.

So, Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword: and they escaped into the land of Armenia. And Esarhaddon ... reigned in his stead" (2 Kings 19:35-37).

The miraculous defeat of Sennacherib's army revealed the power of one angel, while the murder of Sennacherib in the temple of his god was an indictment against a false god who could not protect those who worshipped it.

Upon receiving God's promise of an extended life Hezekiah made an amazing request that God provide a sign that he would be healed.

The Lord, again answered through Isaiah, said, " This sign shalt thou have of the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he hath spoken: shall the shadow go forward

ten degrees, or go back ten degrees?’ And Hezekiah answered, ‘It is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees: nay but let the shadow return backward ten degrees.’ And Isaiah the prophet cried unto the LORD: and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz” (2 Kings 20:9-11).

It is interesting that the Lord would give Hezekiah a choice regarding the shadow of the sun, knowing that going forward would not be anything special. And so, Hezekiah chose the latter, the shadow of the sun should go backwards 10 degrees.

As difficult as this may first appear, there is a sound explanation for how this could be easily accomplished.

Halos are often formed around the sun by ice crystals in the atmosphere. These crystals act as prisms to refract or bend the light, creating luminous rings around the sun. These rings may be horizontal or perpendicular around the sun. Under certain conditions a double halo may form in both directions simultaneously. Where the halos intersect bright spots appear that mimic the sun itself. These are called *parhelia*, *par* meaning “next to,” *helio* meaning “sun.” These are also called “mock suns.” With a certain formation of ice crystals, three equally bright suns appear in a row.

To make the shadow of the sun go backwards on the sundial, a thick cloud formation must cover two of the three suns. As the clouds move in from a determined direction, the shadow would move backwards. The account does not say the sun moved backwards, but it was the shadow that was moved on the sundial. If this explanation is correct, it does not minimize the miracle. Miracles are just as impressive because of their timing and circumstances. God often uses natural means to create a miracle but having them occur at the intended moment shows his mastery and control of all things.

As Hezekiah contemplated the gift of life, he described his desire to praise God, saying, “The grave cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. It is the living, who give thanks to thee, as I do today; A father tells his son about thy faithfulness. The Lord will surely save me; so we will play my songs on stringed instruments all the days of our life at the house of the Lord” (Isaiah 38:18, 19).

These endearing words of Hezekiah provide an interesting clue that may explain something we find in the Book of Psalms. His reference to “my songs” may be referring to Psalms 120-134. These are titled “A Song of Degrees,” literally “A Song for the Degrees” (See Jamieson, Fausset & Brown). This suggests that the writer had something specific in mind. The word for degrees in the



Parhelion Effect, with two mock suns

sub-titles is the same Hebrew word for the 10 degrees that the shadow went back on the sun dial.

It has been suggested that these 15 chapters correspond to the 15 years that Hezekiah’s life was extended (See *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 67). These chapters then comprise the songs of Hezekiah. They are a memorial of the Lord’s deliverance of Jerusalem and the extension of his own life. They contain three repetitive themes. The 15 chapters are divided into 5 sets of three chapters each. The three themes follow each of the chapter divisions.

The **first** theme is: Distress from the deceit and scorning of others.

The **second** theme is: Trust in the Lord expressed by God’s people.

The **third** theme is: Blessings and peace that come to those who trust in Him.

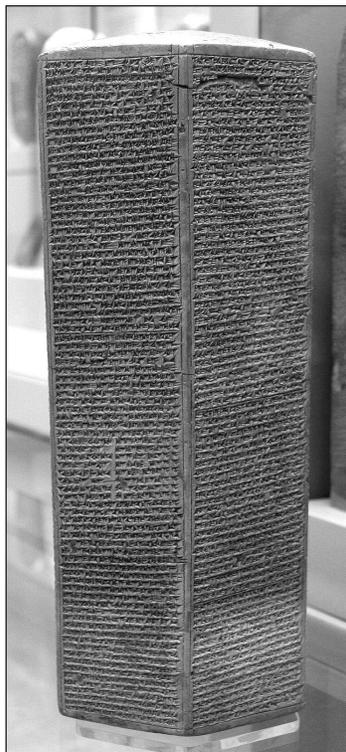
These themes are relevant to all the Lord’s people as they pass through each at one time or another. This was also the experience of Hezekiah, and so these chapters had a deeply personal meaning to him.

In Psalm 124:6-8 Hezekiah’s own experience is clearly referred to when he wrote, “Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: The snare is broken and we are escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

Those sentiments directly relate to Sennacherib’s contention that Hezekiah was like a caged bird. But the reality of what Sennacherib did not say is that the Lord opened the cage and released His people.

From Hezekiah’s experience the Lord’s people can understand there is no enemy who can harm them. There is no fowler who can cage them if they trust in God. He who made heaven and earth is devoted to his faithful people.

— Br. Tom Ruggirello



Sennacherib Cylinder