

GOD'S PLAN FOR SYRIA

As we study through our series "God's Plan for the Nations", I'm sure, - like me, - you find it difficult to understand how, - if our simple reading is correct, - God can turn the present situation in the Middle East around and fulfil what has yet to be fulfilled, in accordance with the promises of His Word.

We're looking at Syria and how it fits into God's plan. In Isaiah 17:1 we read, *Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap.* ... Does this have any relevance on what we see happening today?

As with many countries in the Middle East, the borders of Syria have changed many times. Over the millennia, it has been both the conqueror, and the conquered. It is a very important country in the region. Its capital, - Damascus, - is one of the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Syria's population is 87% Muslim ... comprised of 74% Sunni Muslims, and the rest consisting of Alawi (of which President Assad belongs), Shiite, and Druze (a form of Shiite).

The Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims, - by and large, - govern the region of the Middle Eastern Arab countries. Very basically, the Sunni Muslims are the largest branch of Islam. It is the more orthodox version of Islam. They follow the teachings of Abu Bakr who was the first Caliph (literally a 'vice-regent' after Mohammed, the title for *the* Arabic ruler). The Shiite Muslims, however, are the followers of Mohammed's son-in-law and cousin who they believe is Mohammed's rightful successor ... not Abu Bakr. Without going into too much detail, - since that is not our purpose, - the Sunni Muslims are the majority in most Islamic countries.

Here is how the major regions of the Middle East are divided:

Sunni Muslims. A large part of Syria, except for the northwest (along the coastline). Jordan. A large part of Iraq, except for the southeast (below Baghdad). Saudi Arabia. Oman. Pakistan. Egypt. Gaza Strip (Hamas).

Shiite Muslims. Iran ... and smaller pockets within Yemen and Pakistan, and central to southeastern areas of Iraq.

In Syria there is an Islamic sect known as the Alawi religion. They are connected to Shiite Islam, and they actually integrate their own form of such Christian festivals as Christmas, Easter, and Palm Sunday. They are vastly in the minority, with only 2.1 million Alawi compared to about 13½ million Sunni. President Assad belongs to the minority Alawi religion ...

Of course, he being opposed by the majority Sunni Muslims from the other regions... who are a part of the larger Muslim Brotherhood. However, he is being supported by the Shiite Iranian government.

Now perhaps you might be beginning to see what is truly happening in the Middle East amongst these warring countries. It is the Sunni Muslims who want to involve the West to defeat the Shiite Muslims ... and then, - in future years, - the Western nations will be persuaded to depart the scene as they were in the early to mid parts of the twentieth century.

You see, the modern Syrian state was established after the First World War when it became a French Mandate. However, it gained independence in April 1946, and became a republic. Since then it has passed through multiple military coups and coup attempts, especially from 1949 to 1971. In 1971 Hafez al-Assad assumed control of the country, and he was succeeded in 2000 by his son, Bashar al-Assad.

So, basically, we are seeing an increase in the region of centuries-old hostilities between the two factions of Islam, - the Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims (... and President Assad belongs to a minority faction within the Shiites).

What is Syria's relationship with Israel? In August 2006 the Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon began to fire their rockets into Israel. In Syria, President Assad highly commended the Hezbollah. Jubilantly, he said they had "hoisted the banner of victory", and mounted a "successful resistance". He claimed Arab resistance was growing stronger, and warned Israel that "your warplanes, rockets, and your atomic bomb will not protect you in the future". He called Israel an enemy with whom no peace could be achieved. He was echoing other Islamic leaders such as Yasser Arafat and President Ahmadinejad.

However, - interestingly, - he denied he was anti-Semitic. In fact, he correctly pointed out that the Syrian people have their origins in the Semitic race, the sons of Shem from whom the Jewish people are descended.

Actually, the Bible teaches us the history of Syria goes back further than the history of the nation of Israel. ... Even before Sarah had given birth to Isaac, - from whom Jacob and his twelve sons would arise, - we already read in *Gen. 15:2* Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house *is this Eliezer of Damascus?* ... Damascus, - and Syria, - was already on the map!

So where did Syria begin? To find the answer we turn to Gen. 10 ... to the generations of Noah, and in particular to the generations of Shem [... *Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem*]. One of Shem's sons was called Aram (v.22) ... and the area where he settled was named after him. We find one of the first mentions of this region of Aram in the narrative where Abraham sent his servant back to his homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac, Gen. 24:1 And Abraham was old, *and well stricken in age*: and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. ²And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: ³And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: ⁴But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac. ... 25:20 And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padanaram, the sister to Laban the Syrian. ... [*Isaac and Rebekah (the Syrian) were cousins.*]

When their son Jacob became a fugitive for fear of his brother Esau, he was sent by his parents to Padan-Aram [*in Syria, between the Tigris and the Euphrates*], Gen. 28:1 And Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. 2 Arise, go to Padanaram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother. 3 And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; 4 And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham. 5 And Isaac sent away Jacob: and he went to Padanaram unto Laban, son of Bethuel the Syrian, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother. ...

We even find Moses referring to Jacob as a Syrian ... Moses said to the people of Israel, Dt. 26:5 And thou shalt speak and say before the LORD thy God, A Syrian ready to perish *was* my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ... So, Jacob's wife came from Syria ... even before the twelve tribes came into existence. Hosea mentioned it also, Hosea 12:12 Jacob fled into the country of Syria, and Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he kept *sheep*.

The Syrians, therefore, preceded the Jewish people. However, they were a people of idolatry, and they compromised the sons of Abraham. We see one of the first examples of this when after Jacob departed from Laban with Rachel and Leah, Laban complained that some of his idols had been taken ... Gen. 31:25 Then Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mount: and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mount of Gilead. 26 And Laban said to Jacob, What

hast thou done, that thou hast stolen away unawares to me, and carried away my daughters, as captives *taken* with the sword? 27 Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp? ... 30 And now, *though* thou wouldest needs be gone, because thou sore longedst after thy father's house, *yet* wherefore hast thou stolen my gods? 31 And Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid: for I said, Peradventure thou wouldest take by force thy daughters from me. 32 With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live: before our brethren discern thou what *is* thine with me, and take *it* to thee. For Jacob knew not that Rachel had stolen them. 33 And Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the two maidservants' tents; but he found *them* not. Then went he out of Leah's tent, and entered into Rachel's tent. 34 Now Rachel had taken the images, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found *them* not. ... Rachel was hiding the idols she had brought with her from Syria! Yes, idolatry lurking in the background!

As the years progressed, it continued to be a concerning factor, for example, Judges 10:6 And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim, and Ashtaroth, and *the gods of Syria*, and the gods of Zidon, and the gods of Moab, and the gods of the children of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines, and forsook the LORD, and served not him.

This further developed into confrontation on the battlefield, for example, in the reign of David ... I Chron. 18:3 And David smote Hadarezer king of Zobah unto Hamath, as he went to stablish his dominion by the river Euphrates. ... 5 And when the Syrians of Damascus came to help Hadarezer king of Zobah, David slew of the Syrians two and twenty thousand men. ... i.e. David and the Syrians were enemies. The Syrians were looking for opportunities to have the nation of Israel defeated and crushed. ... On another occasion, the Syrians joined forces with another of Israel's sworn enemies, the Ammonites (I Chron. 19).

They also took the opportunity to maximise Absalom's opposition to his father's strife in II Sam. 15, when they gave refuge to the rebellious son. They had hoped, - through Absalom, - to overthrow King David (see II Sam. 15). Their plans were unsuccessful though.

However, not to be deterred, they tried the old idolatry plan during King Solomon's reign. In I Kgs. 11. Solomon allowed the idols of his wives to be worshipped in Jerusalem. As a consequence, v.23 God stirred him [*Solomon*] up *another* adversary, Rezon the son of Eliadah, which fled from his lord Hadadezer king of Zobah: ²⁴And he gathered men unto him, and became captain over a band, when David slew them *of Zobah*: and they went to Damascus, and dwelt therein, and reigned

in Damascus. ²⁵And he was an adversary to Israel all the days of Solomon, beside the mischief that Hadad *did*: and he abhorred Israel, and reigned over Syria.

There are many examples throughout the Old Testament of how Syria sought the ruination of Israel ... but, on each occasion, God frustrated the enemy.

Then, when we come into the New Testament, we find Jesus visited Syria, Mt. 4:24 And his fame went throughout all Syria: and they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatic, and those that had the palsy; and he healed them.

Saul of Tarsus was confronted by the Lord as he made his way to Damascus. His second missionary journey departed from Antioch in Syria. It was in Damascus he was lowered out of the window and down the city wall, lest the governor of the king arrested him.

So, throughout the Scriptures, the Syrians are constantly in opposition to the people of God, and seeking the downfall of the nation of Israel. ... What does the Bible teach, then, concerning Syria's future? Isaiah prophesies, Is. 17:1 Behold, Damascus is taken away from *being* a city, and it shall be a ruinous heap. 2 The cities of Aroer *are* forsaken: they shall be for flocks, which shall lie down, and none shall make *them* afraid. 3 The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus ... This is a prophecy relating to God's judgment upon the capital city and the nation of Syria [Is. 7:8 the head of Syria *is* Damascus. ... i.e. Damascus = Syria].

Similarly, Jeremiah prophesied, 49:23 Concerning Damascus. Hamath is confounded, and Arpad: for they have heard evil tidings: they are fainthearted; *there is* sorrow on the sea; it cannot be quiet. 24 Damascus is waxed feeble, *and* turneth herself to flee, and fear hath seized on *her*: anguish and sorrows have taken her, as a woman in travail. 25 How is the city of praise not left, the city of my joy! 26 Therefore her young men shall fall in her streets, and all the men of war shall be cut off in that day, saith the LORD of hosts. 27 And I will kindle a fire in the wall of Damascus, and it shall consume the palaces of Benhadad. Since this prophecy has never taken place, it is speaking about a time yet in the future.

Why *will* God judge Syria? Because, Syria, - since as far back as Eliezer of Damascus, - had the opportunity to worship God along with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob etc, but Eliezer of Damascus and his descendants rebelled, and refused.

... And, from the outset, they had dishonoured the benchmark of God's promise to Abraham, Gen. 12:3 I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

When will God bring His judgment upon the nation of Syria and its capital, Damascus (Is. 17:1)? Are we seeing it today in the conflict raging throughout the country? ... Is this God's judgment? No, I don't believe it is ... *not yet!* What we see in this present conflict is Muslim against Muslim ... Sunni Muslim against Shiite (and Alawi) Muslim. It doesn't matter what brand of Islam they belong to ... it is still Muslim against Muslim. Whether President Assad stays in office, or whether he is ousted ... it is not the absolute judgment Scripture prophesies. Whoever wins the conflict ... Damascus and Syria will continue. *But* there is coming a day when that will *not* be the case!

When will it happen? As we see, there is an increasing unifying of the Muslim countries in the area, under the umbrella of the Sunni Muslims, aided by the Muslim Brotherhood. This is building upon their confidence and their one united and declared goal is to enter Jerusalem, claim the complete city, and overrun the people of Israel. That is their intention ... and God's Word concerning the prophecy against Syria describes how it will build up to a crescendo, Is. 17:12 Woe to the multitude of many people, *which* make a noise like the noise of the seas; and to the rushing of nations, *that* make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters! 13 The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but *God* shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like a rolling thing before the whirlwind. 14 And behold at eveningtide trouble; *and* before the morning he *is* not. This *is* the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us. ...

To seek to achieve that aim, there will come a day when they will gather in northern Israel, - in the Valley of Megiddo (Rev. 16:16), where other armies before them have gathered, - and they'll march on Jerusalem (Zech. 14). That is during the critical period about which God has declared, Zech. 12:2 Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah *and* against Jerusalem. 3 And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people.

Read such passages as Psalm 83 and Isaiah 10 to see what the Lord has in store for the enemies of His people. He promises He will protect them in the face of the hostility of Syria and its allies, Is. 54:17 No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue *that* shall rise against thee in judgment

thou shalt condemn. This *is* the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness *is* of me, saith the LORD. ... This is a prophetic statement because it did not relate to ancient times since God *did* allow Israel and Jerusalem to be overrun and invaded by the foreign nations ... so this *most definitely* applies to the future!

I believe we are increasingly witnessing the preparation of the nations against the land and the people of Israel. Syria, - many believe, - is the King of the north described by Daniel (ch. 11) ... We *are* living in exciting times ... and Jesus said, Mt. 24:33 when ye shall see all these things, know that it [His second coming] is near, even at the doors.

What must we do? Keep looking and watching! Keep understanding God has it all under His control. Keep praying for God's people in Syria. Pray for their protection, and their witness. Despite President Assad being intent on remaining in office, the statistics are stacked against him. The surrounding neighbours (and the influence of the Sunni-dominant Muslim Brotherhood), the progressive spirit of the 'Arab spring', the influence of organisations such as the United Nations, the Arab League, and the European Union, - the multitude of many people, ... the rushing of nations, - ... they all seem to indicate President Assad's days are numbered. And the Christian Church is sure to be increasingly persecuted! *Pray for them!*

Pray for the protection of God's people in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and other regions throughout the country. Out of a population of over 22½ million, there is just over 22½ thousand who are reputed to be evangelical believers (0.1%!) ... compared to over 20 million (90%) Muslims.

The days are dark for the Church there. The opposition to them is growing, and set to grow even more! And yet, there will be many from that land around the throne of God in Heaven for there are multitudes in Syria for whom Christ died on the cross of Calvary. He, - the Great Shepherd of the sheep, - will gather in everyone of His precious flock. They have not given up hope ... and they are in the 'eye of the storm'. Their hope remains firmly in the Lord.

And so, in obedience to God and His Word, - and the plans for the nations He has put into place, - may we keep our focus in line with His Word, in step with His Spirit, and looking for His Son! Amen.