

SHALL THE AX BOAST ITSELF AGAINST HIM THAT HEWETH THEREWITH? (Is. 10:15)

This is one of those profound statements in Scripture that often we read over and fail to notice, the complete sentence says, v.15 *Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood.*

On first reading it sounds silly ... and if a sceptical unbeliever would read it he/she might probably lump it with all the other equally nonsensical statements they claim are contained in the Bible.

However, this is truly a profound announcement from God's Word. The background to it, - as we considered this morning, - is God's judgement upon disobedient Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem, - God's people, - had sinned in turning away from Him ... and their sin also impacted upon their care, - or lack of it, - of (v.2) the needy, the poor, the widows, and the orphans. In the opening chapter of Isaiah, the instruction is plain, 1:16 *Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; 17 Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. 18 Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. The same truth was often repeated, for example in Zech. 7:10 And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.*

However, the people of Jerusalem would not listen or repent or care for those God had commanded them to pay particular attention to. They had settled into a comfort zone, in which they did not want to be disturbed! Consequently, God had their beloved city captured and its people carried off into captivity. In captivity they wept, Lam. 5:1 *Remember, O LORD, what is come upon us: consider, and behold our reproach. 2 Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens. 3 We are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows. They had neglected the clear command of God and now He had made them to become like those they had refused to care for.*

Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah, - Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Is. 1:1). Uzziah reigned 52 years (811-759 BC), Jotham reigned 16 years (759-743 BC), Ahaz also reigned 16 years (743-728 BC), and Hezekiah reigned 29 years (728-699 BC).

During those years the prevalent world power was Assyria. The Assyrians were a proud and confident people with a strong history to bolster them in their confidence. They believed in thousands of gods who helped them achieve their goals. It is interesting and fitting to look into their background, and to see where they came from. They were descendants of Asshur, who built the well-known city of Nineveh (Gen. 10:11). Asshur was the son of Nimrod who built Babel (v.10). Nimrod was the son of Cush (v.8), who was the son of Ham (v.6) who was the son who violated his father Noah and was consequently cursed (9:25).

These were a people, therefore, under a curse, - a curse that had never been lifted. No matter how well they seemed to be doing, they were a condemned nation. They were no friends of God's people, even though at times, they might have pretended. Hosea warned the Jews, 14:1 O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. 2 Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips. 3 Asshur shall not save us.

The cloud of Assyria was hanging over Jerusalem. Jerusalem was backslidden, - its people had turned their backs on Jehovah, His Word and His laws. They would not listen to the faithful prophets. They would not return to the Lord and repent of their sins. They openly paraded their disobedience before Him ... in the temple itself, in their homes, and in their society. Jerusalem, - the privileged people of God, - was under the wrath of God. Their predicament was so frightening, and yet they would take no notice ... until the enemy came and carried them away.

Let's have a look at the enemy. First of all ...

THE ENEMY WAS GOD'S INSTRUMENT

* God raised up Assyria, ... *the rod of mine anger*, He said (v.5). And just in case they thought they had not heard it right, He repeated, *the staff in their hand is mine indignation*.

* "I'm going to chastise you", said the Lord. They thought all they had to do was go up to the temple every now and again, and go through a rig-ma-roll to salve their consciences ... but God was saying, "No, it's not good enough!"

- * ... And God raised up Assyria. What would Assyria do? How would they influence the people? ... Assyria's problem was not that it was 'godless', ... it's problem was that it had too many 'gods'!
- * It had gods for every day of the week, for every purpose imaginable.
- * Yes, they had their primary gods, such as Bel/Baal (Canaanite), Ashur the god of Assyria and warfare, the all-important Marduk, Ishtar the goddess of love ... and they had 'lesser' gods such as Sin the moon god, Shamash the sun god, Adad the storm god, Anu the sky god, Apsu the creator god, Mammetum the maker and mother of fate.
- * Nevertheless, God told Isaiah to tell the people He would give Assyria *a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets* (v.6).
- * Assyria was going to bring terrible affliction upon Jerusalem ... but the worst of it was ... God was *using* Assyria and *sending* Assyria upon Jerusalem! ... This was not right!! God should be defending His people, not sending an enemy in to make their lives miserable.
- * Ah, but remember the background here ... v.6 *I will send him against an hypocritical nation*. A nation that claims to be something they are so obviously *not*! A nation that has turned its back upon the foundations upon which it was established ... and God described them as *the people of my wrath*, - so powerful and so personal, ... *my wrath*.
- * The enemy was to be **God's instrument**.

THE ENEMY'S CONCEITEDNESS

- * Assyria, of course, would boast of her great ability to achieve all that was hers.
- * The King of Assyria and his generals are all embroiled in their 'back-clapping sessions'. They were congratulating themselves on how well they were doing.
- * In fact, it did not even need the experienced and experts to win the battles, - send the lesser leaders into battle and they are bound to win also! ... Assyria boasted, v.8 *Are not my princes altogether kings?*
- * One after another the fortified cities fell (v.9) ... Calno (Calneh), Hamath (120 miles to the north of Damascus), and Samaria. Assyria was so powerful, they considered all their enemies 'easy pickings'.
- * Imagine God using such a nation as Assyria to chastise Jerusalem!
- * The king of Assyria was a blasphemer! He referred to God as one of the idols. The Assyrian said, v.11 *Shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols?*

- * He did not recognise as legitimate the God of Israel! This was ambitious, self-exaltation above Jehovah!
- * And yet, these Assyrians were the people God were using ... *the rod of mine anger ... mine indignation!* ... How can it be that God can use such ungodly to chastise the Godly?!!
- * Yes, but look ... The enemy was **God's instrument**, and in becoming so successful the enemy became **conceited** ...

THE ENEMY JUDGED

- * God said the enjoyment of the enemy was coming to an end. That end would be when God's purpose would be fulfilled and Jerusalem would return to the Lord.
- * The Lord promised a time when Jerusalem would be restored, v.12 *it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem.*
- * God did *not* cast His people off. He told Hosea, 14:4 *I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him.*
- * This is the love God has for them, - those whom He has redeemed, Is. 12:1 *in that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me.*
- * The enemy was languishing in power it did not have ... because it was only loaned to them. ... The enemy were saying to themselves, v.13 *By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent ... and he goes off and he gets lost in all the achievements he thinks he gained himself (vv.13-14).*
- * But God determined that when He had made use of Assyria He would throw them away, v.15 *Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith? That was a word of judgement from God. ... or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood.*
- * Who is the greater? ... the axe, or the one yielding it? ... the saw, or the one using it to cut into the wood? ... the rod, or the one who shakes it? ... the staff, or the one who lifts it up off the ground?
- * The axe, the saw, the rod, and the staff are of no consequence until someone takes them and uses them. The axe, the saw, the rod, and the staff *can do nothing in themselves* ... and Assyria was merely the instrument of judgement, - at that time, - in the hands of God.
- * You see, God was saying, "Assyria, thus far and no further". The psalmist wrote, 49:6 *They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; ... 11 Their inward thought is, that their houses shall*

continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. ... 14 Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling.

* God was telling His people He is still in control and He would revive Jerusalem again ... Is. 10:21 The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God.

* ... I'm sure you see what I'm getting at. I trust you see the encouragement the Word of God brings us here. **The enemy was God's instrument, the enemy was conceited, and the enemy was judged ...** You will find a similar picture in Rev. 11.

* But before we look briefly at this passage, do you ever feel our witness is 'barely flickering'? Do you ever feel we are being left behind, because we are too old-fashioned we don't want to keep up with society and the church society has created? Do you ever doubt we have a long-term future? Will the world, - as it rapidly manoeuvres towards all its dreams and aspirations, - ... will the world ever get rid of the true Church of Christ completely? ... Will the Church in the UK just get smaller and smaller until there is nothing left? ... Now let's look at Rev. 11 ...

THE ENEMY ASTOUNDED AND DEFEATED

* In Rev. 11:1-2 the exact dimensions of the temple, - the people of God, - has been measured. Some see these verses as being a literal temple that will be built ... some see it as referring to the temple of the Holy Spirit, i.e. the Church of Christ.

* The testimony and preaching of the two witnesses will cause them to be persecuted, but during this period God promises to uphold their witness ... and we notice that He blesses the fire that proceeds out of their mouth (v.5). ... Notice two things here, - (i) **their mouth**, i.e. they speak the same message, they speak with one voice; (ii) the fire is the Word of God, Jer. 24:29 *Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord.*

* The Word of God was not being accepted. It was too harsh, it was out of keeping with the 'progress' being made in the streets of Jerusalem ... and, as a result, sin was directing the daily affairs of God's people.

* Paul taught there is only way to encounter in, - error - and that is with the truth, ... II Tim. 4:2 *Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.* ... The witness of the disciples in the early Church was obedient to God's calling upon them, but, - even during those times when the Holy Spirit was moving, - a serious decline was in danger of taking place, 3 *For the time will come when*

they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; 4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. ... and that time had come!

* As John watched, in Rev. 11:7 when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. 8 And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.

* While the witnesses of Christ were, - as it were, - lying defeated in the streets the world and all their false religions were enjoying their apparent demise, - it seemed the Church was 'on its way out', v.10 they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth.

* As in those days when Assyria ransacked Jerusalem ... so in Rev. 11:8,9 it looks as if it is all over for the people of God! These 'two prophets' and the messages of fire from the Word of God had been 'tormenting' the people, but now the people were glad 'it was all over'. ... The Church is dead! The Church is finished! No more Gospel preaching! No more preaching about sin, and no more preaching sinners need to be saved!

* Ah, but look! Just as in those days when the Assyrians thought they had consigned the greatness of Jerusalem to history ... and just when those Assyrians thought they had defeated Jerusalem and their God ... we read in Rev. 11:11 after three days and an half the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them.

* The enemies of Christ in the days in which we live boast in how the Church will be not here for much longer. They boast the Church is dying, and will die out. ... The King of Assyria had a similar boast regarding Jerusalem ... but where is the majestic greatness of Assyria today? It is confined to the history books ... while God has restored His own people of Israel back to their capital in Jerusalem!

CONCLUSION

* Don't you see the encouragement for us here? The enemies of God's people think they have the Church 'on its last legs' ... but not so, says God ... v.15 Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith?

* The Word of God is teaching us never to give up and never to give in.

* Don't you see too that just as the two angels did not change their testimony/message, we must also never stray from preaching and upholding the riches of God's grace in salvation, - we must never change our testimony.

* We must never change the eternal message God has set before us to preach because it is His infallible and inerrant Word.

* As God's people we are merely His messengers, and we only must 'pass on' what the Lord has delivered to us.

* Jesus Christ is coming back again, - there is absolutely no doubt about it! And to many, - as in Is. 10 and Rev. 11, - it looks as if we are gasping our final breaths ...

* Jesus said, Mt. 10:22 *ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake, [- they hate Me, and because they hate Me they hate My message, ... and because they hate Me and My message they will also hate you when you bring it to them]:* but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.

* It can't be much longer before He returns for His people. John records, Rev. 11:12 they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them. God's people are under God's control, and in the hand of the Lord Jesus, no man can pluck them out ... and He will draw every last one of us unto Himself forever. ... In Is. 10 God spoke wonderful words of comfort, v.24 *O my people that dwellest in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrian: he shall smite thee with a rod, and shall lift up his staff against thee, after the manner of Egypt. 25 For yet a very little while, and the indignation shall cease, and mine anger in their destruction.*

* Beautiful as that ancient promise was, we have a more beautiful promise because our promise is for eternity ... I Thess. 4:16 *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. ... On that wonderful day, Rev. 21:3 Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. 4 And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*

* Yes, we are coming closer to that momentous event. I trust you are encouraged as you see how in Is. 10 and Rev. 11 out of the dark stormy times the wonderful work of God was graciously seen to be done ... and it cannot be halted or hindered.

* How then are we to live in these days? Paul tells us, II Cor. 4: 1 Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not ... 6:9 let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. ... 14 Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you. 15 For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many [*rebound*] to the glory of God. 16 For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; 18 While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

* Wonderful times in which we are privileged to live! ... Is. 10:15 Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith? Surely not! *God* is in control ... He preserves His people ... and He upholds the honour of His eternal Name.

* The light of Israel shall be for a fire (v.17), - we are promised the light will not go out! It will burn brightly regardless of the size or the antics of the enemy.

* The Holy One is the flame, - Jesus Christ is the Light of the World (Jn. 8:12; 9:5). He was the Flame in the Tabernacle and He was the Flame Who laid His people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. ... His light can never be extinguished, v.17 it shall burn and devour his thorns and his briers in one day; 18 And shall consume the glory of his forest.

* A few years ago when we were with Pastor Jerry Slate he took us to a mountain not far from his home called Kennesaw Mountain. There is a museum there recounting one of the greatest conflicts in the battle of the Civil War between the Confederate and the Union States. General W.T. Sherman of the Union Army was marching towards the sea in 1864, and his army were encamped on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia. However, the Confederate army cleverly outflanked them and caused great havoc threatening to defeat the Union army.

* General Sherman realised this and he ordered the Union garrison commander General Corse and his fifteen hundred men to defend the fort at all costs. The battle was not going in General Corse's favour, and he and his men were driven into a small fort on the crest of the hill ... and it seemed inevitable they would all be slaughtered by the Confederates.

* Just when the battle seemed 'unwinable' a Union officer in the small fort caught sight of a signal on a flag away in the distance, it simply said, "Hold the Fort, I am coming. W.T. Sherman".

- * Six years later, Philip Bliss heard this story, and he wrote the hymn,
 Ho, my comrades! see the signal waving in the sky!
 Reinforcements now appearing, victory is nigh.
“Hold the fort, for I am coming,” Jesus signals still;
Wave the answer back to Heaven, “By Thy grace we will.”
 See the mighty host advancing, Satan leading on;
 Mighty ones around us falling, courage almost gone!
 See the glorious banner waving! Hear the trumpet blow!
 In our Leader’s Name we triumph over ev’ry foe.
 Fierce and long the battle rages, but our help is near;
 Onward comes our great Commander, cheer, my comrades, cheer!
- * We are privileged to be led by a Commander-in-Chief Who has never been defeated, Who does not know what it is like to be defeated, and He never will be defeated.
- * When it seemed they had silenced Him at Calvary ... “Up from the grave He arose!”
- * This is our victorious Saviour and Lord Who we come to remember this evening at the Lord’s Table. Indeed, how privileged we are! May God encourage us and keep us faithful unto His glorious return!