

# OpenTheo

## November 4th: Isaiah 17 & Mark 12:13-34

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An oracle against Damascus and Israel. Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees question Jesus.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 17, an oracle concerning Damascus. Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city, and will become a heap of ruins. The cities of Oroya are deserted.

They will be for flocks which will lie down, and none will make them afraid. The fortress will disappear from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel, declares the Lord of hosts. And in that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.

And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain, and his arm harvests the ears, and as when one gleanes the ears of grain in the valley of Ephraim. Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten, two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, declares the Lord God of Israel. In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel.

He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the asherim or the altars of incense. In that day their strong

cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation. For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the rock of your refuge.

Therefore though you plant pleasant plants, and sow the vine branch of a stranger, though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain. Ah the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thundering of the sea. Ah the roar of nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters.

The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chase like chaff on the mountains before the wind, and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning they are no more. This is the portion of those who loot us, and the lot of those who plunder us.

From oracles concerning Babylon, Assyria, Philistia and Moab, the last two being the near neighbors of Judah, in Isaiah chapter 17 Syria and Israel come into view. These prophecies presumably relate to a time prior to some of the earlier ones. The prophecy concerning Philistia in chapter 14 for instance came in the year of Ahaz's death.

However the prophecies in this chapter seem to relate to the time of the Syro-Ephraimite war. In the concluding years of the 730s BC, Syria and Israel joined together to attack the southern kingdom of Judah. Hoping to remove support for Assyria to their south, they wanted to establish a secure anti-Assyrian alliance, planning to install a puppet king, the son of Tbil, on the throne of Judah to join them.

This crisis provided the backdrop for most of chapters 5-12 of the book of Isaiah. There the Lord called King Ahaz to trust him, promising that Pekah, the son of Ramaliah of Israel and reason of Syria, would be cut off. Ahaz however turned to Assyria and ended up entangling himself in a dangerous alliance, one which moved Judah further in the direction of idolatry and also played some part in precipitating the near destruction of Judah in 701 BC.

The Syro-Ephraimite war was one that was devastating for the southern kingdom of Judah. In one day for instance, as we read in 2nd Chronicles chapter 28, the forces of Pekah, the son of Ramaliah of Israel, killed 120,000 of the men of Judah, their brothers. However after the Assyrians became involved, the situation rapidly changed.

In 734 BC Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria cut off the support of Egypt to the anti-Assyrian alliance. He then attacked Israel, taking significant portions of its territory, and then later defeated Damascus in 732 BC. In 722 BC, Samaria and the northern kingdom would fall to the forces of Shalmaneser V and his successor Sargon II.

The oracle of chapter 17 of Bazaar is introduced as one that concerns Damascus, but it is

the northern kingdom of Israel that is central in much of it, especially from verse 4 onwards. Within that section we see three in-that-day oracles that chiefly concern the nation of Israel in verses 4-6, 7-8 and 9. Damascus and the Arameans or the Syrians are the force supporting Pekah and the northern kingdom, and the pairing of Damascus and Israel is ominous. Israel is going to be judged along with the foreign nation with which it has allied itself.

As John Oswald observes, Damascus was one of the most strategically located cities within the ancient world. The Lord placed the people of Israel at a juncture between different parts of the world, between Africa to the southwest, Europe to the northwest, and Asia to their east. The city of Damascus was on a key point on the pathway that would have led from Mesopotamia to Egypt, a route that would have led through the territories of Israel and Judah.

The Lord declares the coming destruction of this city of Damascus. It would cease to be a city, destroyed in a siege by Shalmaneser V in 732 BC. Both of the powers to the north that had threatened Judah would be brought low and humbled.

They would be stripped of their might. The fortress would disappear from Ephraim and the kingdom from Damascus. Kingdoms that had once been fat would be left thin and emaciated.

Nations that were once like fields golden with grain have been thoroughly harvested, leaving only the most meager gleanings. They are also compared to olive trees, beaten so that all but a few of the olives have been collected, those few olives remaining on the most inaccessible boughs. Some of the remnant of Israel would however respond in an appropriate manner to this national humiliation.

They would recognize the futility of their idols. Asherah was understood as the goddess who was the consort of the god El, or alternatively Baal. Associated with cultic poles, trees and groves, she was a goddess of fertility.

And yet the remnant of Israel, because they had rejected the Lord, was experiencing not fertility but futility in their labors within the land. For all of their work in planting, their harvest was lacking. They had forgotten the god of their salvation and not remembered the rock of their refuge.

The language of rock here might recall the similar language that we see in Deuteronomy chapter 32, in verses 15 to 18 of that chapter for instance. But Shishurim grew fat and kicked. Ye grew fat, stout, and sleek.

Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger.

They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new

gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. Commentators debate whether the final three verses of this chapter, verses 12 to 14, should be connected primarily with the rest of chapter 17, or with verses 1 to 7 of the chapter that follows.

It describes an invading force, in much the same language as we see in chapter 8, verses 6 to 8. Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloh that flow gently, and rejoice over Rezan and the son of Remeliah, therefore behold the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels, and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah. It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel.

Yet what seems to be an unstoppable force of water that's coming to deluge the land, turns out to be chaff on the mountains that's blown away before the wind, a force presumed to be irresistible, is quickly dissipated. The description of a vast invading force that is removed in a single night seems to match the description of what happens to Sennacherib's in Isaiah chapter 37, verses 36 to 37. A question to consider, in this chapter we see one of the earlier expressions of a theme that is very important in the book of Isaiah, the humbling of the false gods and the idols.

What are some other places in the Old Testament where we see this theme expressed? Mark chapter 12 verses 13 to 34. And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them or should we not? But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. And they brought one. And he said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's.

Jesus said to them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marveled at him. And the Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection.

And they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. There were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring, and the second took her and died, leaving no offspring, and the third likewise.

And the seven left no offspring. Last of all, the woman also died. In the resurrection,

when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife.

Jesus said to them, Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, Which commandment is the most important of all? Jesus answered, The most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.

And the scribe said to him, You are right, teacher, you have truly said that he is one, and that there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God.

And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions. In chapter 12 of Mark, Jesus is engaging with his opponents in the context of the temple. And here the Pharisees collude with the Herodians to trap him.

The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem, but Jesus came from Herod Antipas' territory. And Herod Antipas was in Jerusalem at the time for the feast. Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question.

To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and by extension of the legitimacy of the Roman's authority in the Holy Land. And the Denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God. One way or another, Jesus seems to be caught.

Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and the revolutions against Rome, or he will seem to be like a compromiser or an accommodationist with Rome. The Pharisees and the Herodians begin with flattery. They're trying to put Jesus off his guard, and perhaps to tempt him into the radical answer by praising his virtue of fearless candour.

The statement that Jesus is not swayed by appearances also means, quite literally, that he does not look at people's faces. And it was precisely the face of a person, Caesar, that was part of what was at issue here. Jesus' answer is a profoundly shrewd one.

Before he even addresses the issue, he asks them why they are testing him. Connecting

what they are doing with Satan's testing of him. Then, as he answers their question more directly, he deals with it in some very clever ways.

First of all, he asks them to produce a coin. They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession, compromising them. The Jews could enjoy their own coinage to some degree, but they clearly had one of these coins in their possession, so they were in a difficult position if they were going to ask a question that was designed to trap him, because they were caught too.

The statement, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, is ambiguous but brilliant. To some, it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him. To others, pay your taxes.

However, there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness to be to Caesar and to God. You need to recognise what Caesar is owed and what God is owed.

There may be opposition between those two, but Caesar is owed something. Some have seen in the identification of Caesar's image an implication that we are supposed to render the image of God to God, as in our persons and other persons. The reasoning of Jesus, however, is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something given for services given.

Those dues could be paid while still having a certain ambivalence in relationship to Caesar. Jesus' answer is neither that of the accommodationist or the compromiser, nor that of the revolutionary. He treads a line between compliance and resistance.

Rendering to God limits what you render to Caesar. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Following this, Jesus is challenged by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection.

They present an elaborate account of the performance of the Leveret marriage, in this case of a woman who's gone through a number of different husbands who have not born her a child. And the question is, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges their presuppositions. They see the resurrection almost as a perpetuation of the existing form of life, whereas for Jesus it's a transformation.

Marriage and giving in marriage function to fulfil the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And it also serves to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death. This is one of the significances of the Leveret law.

The Leveret law was to raise up seed for the dead brother. Of course, the resurrection is a different way of raising up seed from the dead. The resurrection involves a new principle of generation or regeneration.

It's no longer marriage through which people are born, but through the rebirth from the dead. The angels don't marry, but are a non-procreating living host. Here it might be interesting to see Jesus' teaching against the background of something like 1 Enoch 15 3-10, apocryphal literature that would provide an understanding of how angels were viewed by many at the time.

The angels are also presented as if a band of brothers. There are no women among them. There are no fathers and sons.

The resurrection then isn't just revivification and return to our existing form of life. It is a transformation of life where we will no longer be faced by the reality of death or the need to procreate and fill the earth. And in that context there is no longer the need for marriage.

This doesn't mean that we cease to be male and female, but it does mean that procreation ends. Jesus' reference to Exodus chapter 3 seems very odd here. The statement that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would not seem to imply that resurrection will occur.

However, it presents the action of the Exodus as being done for their sake in part. It suggests that they haven't just simply ceased to be. They have a destiny still to be worked out.

A destiny in their descendants, but also a destiny in their own persons. The event of the Exodus is a new birth. It's a birth event occurring through the events of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea.

God is raising up Israel from slavery and raising up in them the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And there's more going on here. There are themes of resurrection within it.

The bones of Joseph are being taken up with them, raised up out of Egypt, brought into the Promised Land and buried in Shechem. The great attention given in the story of Genesis to burial of the patriarchs and their wives from Genesis chapter 23 onwards is already an indication that the body is not just to be discarded, that the body has some destiny remaining to it. And what happens to that body after its death is a matter of extreme importance.

Jesus' response to the testing of the Sadducees here might also recall his response to the testing that he received earlier concerning Moses' teaching concerning divorce. In both cases Jesus highlights a problem of perception in his opponents and also the way in which the proof text that they brought forward needs to be relativised. Finally, a scribe presents a third question to him.

Although Mark doesn't present it as a testing question in the same way, it seems to be more genuine. The scribe has seen that Jesus answered the other question as well and

he wants to see how he will answer this question. Is Jesus going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching? Perhaps the greatest commandment is you shall not murder or maybe the greatest commandment is remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Whatever Jesus answers, maybe he's going to tread on some toes, open himself up to some criticism, suggest some imbalance at the heart of his belief. But Jesus' answer once more is shrewd. The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema.

In this commandment the entire law is encapsulated and the second great commandment arises from it. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself. These two commandments sum up the entire ten commandments and all the other commandments.

The law is not just a collection of miscellaneous laws that are assembled together. There is a logic and a unity and a system of truth summed up in the call to love God and neighbour. The whole purpose of the law is encapsulated in these things and then it's refracted into these specific commandments which explain what that actually looks like.

The statements that Jesus identifies are also taken from the law itself. They're taken from summary sections of the law. Leviticus chapter 19 is a summary of key elements of the second table of the law, the way that we relate to our neighbour.

And Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 5 is at the very outset of chapter 6 to 26 which unpacks the ten commandments which are given in chapter 5. The law and the prophets all arise out of this. By contrast the scribes and the Pharisees approach to the law is so often one that takes bits and pieces and abstracts them from a larger system of truth that is ordered around a central principle, the loving God and loving neighbour. The commandments that Jesus identifies express the positive truth at the heart of all the thou shalt not's.

While the scribes and the Pharisees nullify the law on account of their tradition, Jesus fulfills it. He highlights that reality that lies at the very heart, the centre, the weighty matters of the law. The scribe responds to Jesus' answer with great approval and actually expands upon his answer by showing that obedience is greater than sacrifice.

And hearing this response Jesus declares that the scribe is not far from the kingdom of God. Once he's appreciated the true nature of what it means to keep the law of God, the centrality of loving God and neighbour and the importance of this over sacrifice, he has grasped one of the very core principles of the kingdom of God. A question to consider.

In Jesus' teaching concerning divorce he draws the attention of his hearers back to the period before the fall to God's original institution of marriage and his creation of man and



woman. In his response to the Sadducees he draws attention to something that lies beyond the patterns of this age, to a new heavens and a new earth where there will no longer be marriage and giving in marriage but we will be like a heavenly host. How can marriage in the valley of this present age be informed by the reality of these two horizons?