

The Visions of Ezekiel

Lesson 22

I. Vision Nine - (31:1 – 31:18) 11th Year, 1st Day, 3rd Month

Ezekiel's Forty-seventh Assignment from the LORD – Pharaoh (31:1-18)

1. The Date (31:1)

31:1 In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first of the month, the word of the LORD came to me saying,

Twenty-three days had passed since the last vision. Jerusalem was still intact but not for long.

a) The Audience – Egypt (31:2)

31:2 "Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes, 'Whom are you like in your greatness?"

The eyes of the LORD were still focused on Egypt, specifically its Pharaoh. *"Whom are you like in your greatness?"* was the LORD's question. Pharaoh Hophra was still on the throne in Egypt but he was a weak leader compared to his father – Necco. But the all-seeing, all-knowing LORD God already knew the destiny of Hophra. He had sixteen years of breath left in him at the time of this vision. We might correctly assume that the heart of Amasis, his general, was already turning against him, quietly gathering his support in the dark and silent recesses of the kingdom. How great was Hophra in his kingdom? To answer that question, the LORD had a list for comparison purposes.

b) The Comparison (31:3-18)

(1) The Trees of Assyria (31:3)

31:3 'Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon With beautiful branches and forest shade, And very high, And its top was among the clouds.

First, the LORD compared Hophra to the *"...cedars of Lebanon with beautiful branches and forest shade, And very high"* May we pay attention to that word *"beautiful"* for just a moment? Before the English translation by Tyndale in AD 1525, the word *"beautiful"* did not exist in the English language. It was created by Tyndale, a new word, for the readers of that first English translation from the Hebrew. Wycliffe (AD 1390), one hundred and thirty-five years before Tyndale used the word *faire* in his English translation. In fact, the word was created from two words, *faire* and *full*. We can quickly exclude the Hebrew word, *yepheb*, used here as a source for the new word because it sounds nothing like *"beautiful"*. It meant *"the most pleasing"* to the eye. Hebrew speaking people would understand that, but the English might not. Tyndale created his word from the Old French *biaute* which meant *"goodness to the eye"* or physically attractive. One interesting side note here is that when it was used for women it meant *"pleasing to the senses,"* but when used for men it was an outright insult. Tyndale snatched the word *biaute* and added the word *full*. It was an Old English word that meant *"all that could be held."* Tyndale understood the Hebrew and wanted to convey to the English reader that the cedars of Lebanon were pleasing to the eye and filled up the sky high into the air, touching even the clouds at times.

The nation of Assyria was known for the cedars of Lebanon which grew within the borders of its empire. But where was Assyria at the time of this vision? Gone. Dead. Buried by the Babylonian Empire. It was a metaphor for the future fate of Pharaoh Hophra.

(2) The Waters of Assyria (31:4)

31:4 'The waters made it grow, the deep made it high. With its rivers it continually extended all around its planting place, And sent out its channels to all the trees of the field.

What made the cedars of Lebanon great? The waters of Assyria. *"With its rivers it continually extended all around its planting place...."* Not only were the cedars watered but also all the other trees within and around the Assyrian Empire were. But what happened to those Assyria waters? Assyria owned them no more! Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire took them, captured them, owned them.

(3) The Boughs of Assyria (31:5)

31:5 'Therefore its height was loftier than all the trees of the field And its boughs became many and its branches long Because of many waters as it spread them out.

Large were the cedars of Lebanon that were owned by the Assyrians. The word "boughs" is not commonly used in our English today, but its meaning is extremely appropriate for the context. It is an Old English word that means "twig or branch of a tree." It comes from the Old High German word *buog* which means "upper part of the arm." Think of the boughs as all the healthy new growth on a tree that sprouts out at the edges of the older branches. It is upon these boughs that the leaves grow and on most varieties of trees that the fruit appears on each year. Such growth requires a good source of water and Assyria had just that. Of course, the "boughs" of the tree is a metaphor for the vastness of the Assyrian Empire which shaded many thousands of miles of land and many neighboring communities of people.

(4) The Birds of Assyria (31:6)

31:6 'All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs, And under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth, And all great nations lived under its shade.

Surely, the *"birds of the heavens"* nesting in the boughs of the cedars of Lebanon is a metaphor for all the people who lived in the Assyrian Empire who made it their home and raised their families. As an empire, Assyria provided shade or protection for many "great nations." Included in its empire from 900 BC to 612 BC were the nations of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, today's Lebanon, Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

(5) The Roots of Assyria (31:7)

31:7 'So it was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; For its roots extended to many waters.

At the time of the Assyrian Empire, no other empire had controlled so much land mass and so many people. Its roots ran deep and long. On an actual tree, it is often easy to know how far the roots extend from the center of the tree; they run to the drip line. The drip line is the outer edge of the foliage of the tree. The leaves of the trees catch the raindrops and cause them to drip straight down to the ground to feed the roots. The roots of the trees will tend to stop growing at the edge of the tree where the last raindrops fall, the drip edge. Rain falls quickly and waters the ground, but the leaves of a tree catch the rain drops and hold them in the tree for a short while before they drop. This process causes the rainwater to drip slowly to the ground and soak deep down to the roots negating the problem of a fast water runoff before it can saturate the ground and get to the roots.

(6) The Greatness of Assyria (31:8)

31:8 'The cedars in God's garden could not match it; The cypresses could not compare with its boughs, And the plane trees could not match its branches. No tree in God's garden could compare with it in its beauty.

When speaking of the Assyrian Empire, how can we reconcile the words, *"No tree in God's garden could compare with it in its beauty"*? The cedar trees were cedar, the cypress trees were fir or pine and the plane trees

were chestnut. The chestnut trees were highly esteemed by the Greeks and the Romans because of their beauty. We have already addressed the word “beauty” in this chapter. The Hebrew is *yepheb* and it means “most pleasing.” As for a comparison to the trees in “God’s garden,” the best understanding for this metaphor is a comparison of their size. The cedars of Lebanon must have been larger than any tree in “God’s garden” and therefore more pleasing because of their grandeur.

(7) The Jealous of Assyria (31:9)

31:9 'I made it beautiful with the multitude of its branches, And all the trees of Eden, which were in the garden of God, were jealous of it.

How can “... *all the trees of Eden, which were in the garden of God* ...” be jealous of the cedars of Lebanon? The Hebrew word for “jealous” is *wayqanuhu* and translated in the English Scripture as either “jealous or zealous.” The English word comes from the Old French “gelos” which was borrowed from the Late Latin “zelos.” In both cases, the word is used to mean “rivalry” either in a positive (fond) or negative (envious) sense, both stemming from the same human emotion – a fervent inspiration that moves the human emotion within. Perhaps neither. Perhaps in this passage the LORD is simply stating that the trees of the garden of God could not help but take notice of and admire the greatness of the cedars. Metaphorically, the Assyrian Empire was a sight to behold compared to the garden of Eden in size and scope.

(8) The Haughtiness of Assyria (31:10)

31:10 'Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Because it is high in stature and has set its top among the clouds, and its heart is haughty in its loftiness,

But the cedars of Lebanon were overpowering and taking over the land of Lebanon. Tall trees with thick canopies often restrict the growth of plants of smaller stature that attempt to grow at their bases. The word “*haughty*” is used here and it means “high or exalted.” Surely the trees were taller than all the others around. That is the nature of the cedar trees of Lebanon, but this is a metaphor for the attitude of the Assyrian Empire. It thought it was greater and more powerful than all the other nations, too big, too strong and too sturdy to be toppled.

(9) The Attacker of Assyria (31:11)

31:11 therefore I will give it into the hand of a despot of the nations; he will thoroughly deal with it. According to its wickedness I have driven it away.

But the Assyrian Empire could be toppled, and the LORD was sending “*a despot of the nations*” to do it. The word “despot” simply means “a leader or chief.” Nebuchadnezzar was his name and he was the chief of many nations who would trample the Assyrian Empire and repay its wickedness “*according to its wickedness....*” God had ordained the great fall of Assyria and it would fall like a large tree.

(10) The Destruction of Assyria (31:12)

31:12 "Alien tyrants of the nations have cut it down and left it; on the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land. And all the peoples of the earth have gone down from its shade and left it.

The word “*alien*” simply means “strangers.” The word “*tyrants*” simply means “terror-striking.” Nebuchadnezzar was the “terror-striking stranger” who cut down the Assyrian Empire. For all the people of the empire, “*its shade*” was gone, meaning its protection and power had disappeared.

(11) The Ruins of Assyria (31:13-14)

31:13 "On its ruin all the birds of the heavens will dwell, and all the beasts of the field will be on its fallen branches 31:14 so that all the trees by the waters may not be exalted in their stature, nor set their top among the clouds, nor their well-watered mighty ones

stand erect in their height. For they have all been given over to death, to the earth beneath, among the sons of men, with those who go down to the pit."

In 612 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, acting as the general for his father's army, marched into the capital of Assyria and destroyed the great city called Nineveh. The king of Assyria had run from the capital and headed toward Damascus. General Nebuchadnezzar tracked him to Damascus and defeated him there. The Assyrian Empire was cut down. In Nineveh, Nebuchadnezzar did not leave one stone upon another and to this day the stones lie right where he left them. Ruins! In many ways, the entire empire was left in ruins. As for those whom Nebuchadnezzar killed in the campaign, specifically the leaders of the Assyrian Empire, their eternity was set to be in the "pit," eternal torment.

(12)The Lamentations of Assyria (31:15)

31:15 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "On the day when it went down to Sheol I caused lamentations; I closed the deep over it and held back its rivers. And its many waters were stopped up, and I made Lebanon mourn for it, and all the trees of the field wilted away on account of it.

The "*lamentations*" for the Assyrian Empire was the funeral dirge sung at its death when the nation became dehydrated and lifeless.

(13)The Dead of Assyria (31:16-17)

31:16 "I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall when I made it go down to Sheol with those who go down to the pit; and all the well-watered trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, were comforted in the earth beneath. 31:17 "They also went down with it to Sheol to those who were slain by the sword; and those who were its strength lived under its shade among the nations.

The takeover of Assyria by Nebuchadnezzar was not without its bloodbaths – many died in his campaign. Using the metaphor of the trees, both the "*trees of Eden*" and the "*choicest and best of Lebanon, were comforted in the earth beneath.*" Here we must face a reality straight on, something had happened to the trees of the garden of Eden, the home of Adam and Eve. We know that the couple were expelled from the garden after their sin and we know that they were barred from the Tree of Life. We know that a cherub was placed there to protect that tree. But what about all the rest of the trees in the garden? What happened to them? We do not know! However, in this passage the LORD seems to reveal that the "*well-watered trees of Eden*" withered and died in the same way the cedars of Lebanon would wither and die. Together, the trees would turn to mulch. However, this passage is a metaphor for people, not trees. What happened to the people of Eden? What happened to Adam and Eve? Adam died at the age of 930 (*Genesis 5:5*). We do not know the age of Eve, but we do know she also died. Where did they go? To Sheol and the pit! To eternity and the grave. There, too, arrived the dead in Nebuchadnezzar's campaign.

(14)The Comparison to Assyria (31:18)

31:18 "To which among the trees of Eden are you thus equal in glory and greatness? Yet you will be brought down with the trees of Eden to the earth beneath; you will lie in the midst of the uncircumcised, with those who were slain by the sword. So is Pharaoh and all his hordes!" declares the Lord GOD."

Egypt was the chief ally of the Assyrian Empire when it was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. The leaders of Assyria were not "*equal in glory and greatness*" to Eden's Adam and Eve and neither was Pharaoh Hophra "*and all his hordes.*" Hophra was doomed by the LORD to be "*slain by the sword*" and his general, Amasis, made sure of that. Here we come to a phrase we have mentioned before. "... *you will lie in the midst of the uncircumcised*" When we mentioned this before, it was about the Phoenician leader of Tyre and said, "you will die the death of the uncircumcised," (28:10). There we learned that the Phoenicians practiced circumcision; therefore, the reference was directed at the physical circumcision of the leader of

Tyre. Rather, it was meant that the leader of Tyre would die in shame. In Ezekiel 32:30 we learned that the leader did die in shame and was laid down with the uncircumcised in a shameful way. Here, Egypt did not practice circumcision; nevertheless, this passage was not a reference to the act of circumcision but to the shame with which Pharaoh Hophra would die.

According to history, General Amasis met Pharaoh Hophra on the battlefield. Hophra was captured, handed to his own Egyptian people who strangled him. What more shameful a death? His body was buried at the Sais royal cache. Herodotus, the great historian visited Sais about 450 BC (modern Sa el-Hagar). It was heavily waterlogged and never properly investigated.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Clayton, Peter A., "Chronicle of Pharaoh," (Thames & Hudson, London, 1994), p.197.