

Isaiah Chapters 15-18 – John Karmelich

1. If you recall, the title for the last lesson was "what about those guys?" as it focused on nations that either had attacked, are attacking or will attack Israel around Isaiah's time. Believe it or not that'll lead us right to this week's title, "What about all those other people around here?"
 - a) Israel now and then is surrounded by nations that don't want them to exist as a nation.
 - b) It would be logical for God through Isaiah to next bring up the topic of what about all the nations surrounding us? What's going to happen to them?
 - c) If you've been with me through the last bunch of lessons, you may have noticed a pattern that God's judgment first focused on the Israelites themselves. Then Isaiah focused on the nations or empires that have attacked or will attack Israel around Isaiah's time. It'd make sense for Isaiah to next bring up the issue of other nations nearby Israel.
 - d) By the way, the one nation not in this lesson is Egypt. That's because the future of Egypt is a topic all to itself and will be the central topic of the next lesson.
 - e) Realize we're going to cover four chapters in this lesson. They're all short chapters. Each of them deal with nations bordering Israel or near Israel that have had dealings with them for many a century.
2. OK, I can just hear all of you thinking, "Why should I care about any of this stuff? After all I have enough to worry about than to care about God's plans for these people. Even if this is in the bible I've got enough on plate than to care about the past or future of these groups." For all of you who have been with me for awhile you know how much I just love that question, so here goes:
 - a) The issue for us isn't so much the future of nations near Israel. The issue is to realize how God's got plans for our "neighbor's" as well as us. The issue is about getting past our own lives and seeing the world from God's perspective. That perspective is essentially that He cares for all people and wants to see as many as possible make a free will decision to serve the God who created them in the first place. The point is if God's got a future plan for all those who've either helped or hurt us, or even those we don't care about, then God wants us to make a difference in the world around us.
 - b) Let me try this another way: I suspect everyone reading this has some sort of relationship with their neighbors. It may be a casual relationship or we may know them well. Maybe we know nothing about them. The point is God called us to be a witness to those around us. We should be living differently enough that if it were a crime to be a true believer in God, the evidence of our lives should convict us. I'm not saying we have to go pound on our neighbor's door and leave bible tracks there every day. I'm saying our life should be full of evidence that we're making a difference for Jesus and it's noticeable to others.
3. Believe it or not, all of that leads me back to these chapters. The first two deal with a group called Moab. They were just east of Israel. They're sort of "cousins" to the Israelites. The Moabites have had a strange long-term relationship with them. There were times in history when the Moabites wanted to kill the Israelites. There were times when the Moabites were subject to the Israelites, as they had to pay taxes to them as protection. My simple point is the Israelites have had a long and uneven relationship with that nation and it'd be logical for the Israelites to be curious as to what'll happen to them in the future. We should care because it shows God knows the future in advance of all people not just those who are called to serve Him.
 - a) Suppose I already believe God knows the future of all people. Suppose I already believe God protects those of us who are called to serve Him by dealing with our neighbors. Tell me how any of this is relevant to my life? The issue isn't so much the Moabites, it's about keeping in mind the fact that God's watching over our lives and our interactions with our neighbors. It's here to remind us that when we deal with our neighbors, whether they're believers or not, God's watching over us and wants us to be a good witness to them. As we read about these groups, realize God knows their and our destinies as well.

4. There are two other groups discussed in these chapters too. Chapter 17 deals with a nation just to the north of Israel called Syria. This can be a little confusing because the words Syria and Assyria are similar. The Assyrians were a big empire based out of a city that existed in "Iraq" today. The Syrians were a different nation that lived to this day just to the north of Israel. They've had their own history with Israel and it's not always been good. Today, there is a civil war going on there. Israel is staying out of it as if to say, "You guys duke it out with each other and leave us out of it."
 - a) In this chapter God through Isaiah tells us about the future of Syria and its capital, the city of Damascus and what'll become of them. Realize part of this text refers to events that did occur a long time ago. There are also aspects that I'm convinced will occur in the future.
 - b) It's worth taking a few minutes to read this chapter to see God's plans for this group that's generally been hostile to Israel all through its history.
5. Then of all places, we get a discussion about Ethiopia. Some scholars refer to Chapter 18 as being the most trivial chapter in the bible. That's because Ethiopia doesn't border Israel. However they have had some dealings with them through the millenniums. There's a few interesting aspects in modern history connecting those two countries and I'll discuss them in this lesson.
6. Finally realize these chapters do have a few references to God's people as well. The point is all of this text isn't just about "them", but about our relationship with "them". God cares how we act in our relationship with people around us. If we keep that in mind as we study these groups living around Israel it may give us something to think about the next time we have dealings with those living around us. If you get that, you're ready to read the details of these chapters. Speaking of which, time to get started:
7. Chapter 15, Verse 1: An oracle concerning Moab: Ar in Moab is ruined, destroyed in a night! Kir in Moab is ruined, destroyed in a night! ² Dibon goes up to its temple, to its high places to weep; Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba. Every head is shaved and every beard cut off. ³ In the streets they wear sackcloth; on the roofs and in the public squares they all wail, prostrate with weeping. ⁴ Heshbon and Elealeh cry out, their voices are heard all the way to Jahaz. Therefore the armed men of Moab cry out, and their hearts are faint.
 - a) The first thing to catch about these verses is that Isaiah is very blunt to tell us he's giving us a prediction about the nation of Moab. The hills just east of Israel across the Dead Sea are still called Moab today. That area is part of the country of Jordan that was formed as part of the peace treaty after World War II ended. My point is while there are no people who are called Moabites today the "hills of Moab" still exist just east of Israel.
 - b) Know that I've given you a Middle East geography and history lesson, I can explain what the verses are saying. First Isaiah mentions three cities in Moab that get destroyed by the coming Babylonian invasion. Remember that the Babylonians weren't conquering nations until about one hundred years after Isaiah's time. My point is Isaiah's stating the future to them, even though this is ancient history for us. Even when the text says, "Dibon goes up to its temple", Dibon refers to a place. My point is all the strange words mentioned here in these verses are towns or cities in the country of Moab.
 - c) Let's be honest, unless you're from that area or know that geography well, you're going to forget the names of these places pretty quickly. The point of these verses is for us to know how God plans to wipe out the Moabite nation.
 - d) A little more background may be helpful here: The Moabites are "a distant cousin" to the Israelites as the nation started from Abraham's nephew Lot after the Sodom & Gomorrah destruction. The Moabites tried to prevent the Israelites from entering the land. A strange story in Numbers is about the king of Moab hiring a prophet to curse the Israelites but the prophet blesses them instead. The prophet refused to "go against his information source" even though the king of Moab offered to make this prophet rich. My simple point is Moab has had a history of negative dealings with Israel going back millenniums. At the time of Israel being declared an independent nation, Jordan (Moab today) fought them and again in the 1967 war. My point is "Moab" has been fighting Israel all through that time.

- e) That leads me back to these verses. There are several references to the Moabites crying in pain over their losses. In that culture, a sign of grief was to shave one's head and cut off a beard if one had it. Verse 5 describes armed men crying out in grief over the damage done to their land and their losses of both life and possessions.
 - f) Notice the verses don't mention who does the destruction. It just describes demise of that place. Realize the focus of Isaiah's writing is for those people who were or should trust in the God who created them. God's effectively saying, "You know those people living right across the river who are always troubling you? Well don't worry about them as they'll be wiped out as a nation soon enough and suffer much destruction and loss of life."
 - i) That leads me back to you and me. If God's going to send to hell all people who'll refuse to believe in Him and His complete payment for all our sins why should we care about them? It's like the horrible attitude of "I'm saved, too bad for you, so go leave me alone and I'll leave you alone". Let's be honest, that flies in the face of the "Great Commission" which Jesus calls on all Christians to do, which is to tell other people and groups about Him.
 - ii) My point is the Israelites shouldn't look at their neighbors and think, "OK good for them, God's going to wipe them out. Good riddance." Instead He wants us to care for others and make a difference. Isaiah's not telling us God's plans for destroying the Moabites just so Israelites can say "Good riddance". It's so that they and us can warn people about judgment day coming and lead others to repentance.
 - iii) With that tough point made, it's time to get back to Isaiah.
8. Verse 5: My heart cries out over Moab; her fugitives flee as far as Zoar, as far as Eglath Shelishiyah. They go up the way to Luhith, weeping as they go; on the road to Horonaim they lament their destruction. ⁶ The waters of Nimrim are dried up and the grass is withered; the vegetation is gone and nothing green is left. ⁷ So the wealth they have acquired and stored up they carry away over the Ravine of the Poplars. ⁸ Their outcry echoes along the border of Moab; their wailing reaches as far as Eglaim, their lamentation as far as Beer Elim. ⁹ Dimon's waters are full of blood, but I will bring still more upon Dimon-- a lion upon the fugitives of Moab and upon those who remain in the land.
- a) If I had to give the key point to this whole chapter (you've just read all nine verses) I'd say the first phrase of Verse 5 is the key point. Notice Isaiah says for God, "My heart cries out over Moab". There's my proof text that the issue isn't "Good riddance". The Moabites are still people created by God who He wants to repent so He can spend eternity with them.
 - b) The point is God wants us to be a witness to our neighbors just as God called Israel to be a witness to their neighbors. Yes Isaiah is describing the destruction of Moab. That's all the text of the rest of these verses in one thought. What we should remember isn't all of these geography details but the issue of being a good witness to others around us. Just as Moab is destined for destruction, effectively so are we. Let's be honest, the statistics on death are pretty strong: One out of every one person dies one day. That's why I'm making a strong point about using our lives as a witness for God. All people will either spend eternity in God's presence or away from His presence. Therefore, telling others about how and why we should draw close to God now in this lifetime is an essential aspect of how God wants us to live out our Christian life as well as how God wanted the Israelites to live back then.
 - c) Let's be honest, we're going to forget pretty fast some of the details of these verses. When we read of "Dimon's waters being full of blood", we'd probably say, OK, where is that? I'd tell you the geography details, but you can google them if interested. What is much more important is to realize that God knows the future of this world, including the fact that all of us are going to die one day, either "pleasantly or unpleasantly" and we all have to face His judgment one day. As we read all this "hot and heavy" judgment against Moab, think of it as a reminder that God called us to a witness to our "neighbors" just as God called the Israelites to be a witness to their neighbors. Meanwhile, we're not done with Moab yet.

9. Chapter 16, Verse 1: Send lambs as tribute to the ruler of the land, from Sela, across the desert, to the mount of the Daughter of Zion.
- a) I have to admit, I'm fascinated with Verse 1 for a number of reasons. First I need to give a little more history to explain why that is so. When the Moabites were being invaded by a foreign army, many residents fled to the adjacent country of Edom, just north of there. If my memory is right, Edom was subject to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and had to pay a "tax" to them in lamb's wool. I only mention that to show the literalness of how true this prophecy became.
 - b) However, that's not the part that fascinates me. It is the word "Sela". Many of us know it by its Greek name, "Petra". It's a famous city as it's built within high rocks and it's almost impossible to conquer. It was made famous in the Indiana Jones movie series as part of it was filmed there. What's also significant about Petra to bible scholars is that whenever all the bad stuff happens in most of the book of Revelation, both Daniel and Jesus Himself do hint at the fact that "Petra" will be the place for Israelites to flee to at that time for safety as it will be beyond Satan's "grasp" to destroy Israelites then and there. That's a whole study all to itself, so let's just say that "Petra" plays a role in the end times scenario here.
 - i) The reason I bring that up here, is we get a hint of its significance here as the text makes reference to "Petra" (i.e., Sela) being across the desert from "The mount of the Daughter of Zion", which is a reference to Jerusalem being across a desert area (where the Dead Sea is located) and across the Jordan River and then up the hills that are part of Jordan today. My point is simply that we sort of get a clue here of Petra being a place that's not far from God's people where they could go to if needed.
 - ii) OK good for the Israelites whenever all that bad stuff happens, what about us? In context, this verse continues this short 13 verse chapter that reminds us that God is calling us to share His love with our neighbors just as Israel's neighbors are about to be destroyed just as our "neighbor's" will also die one day.
10. Verse 2: Like fluttering birds pushed from the nest, so are the women of Moab at the fords of the Arnon. ³ "Give us counsel, render a decision. Make your shadow like night-- at high noon. Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees. ⁴ Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you; be their shelter from the destroyer." The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land.
- a) If you think I'm "out in left field" as I compare the destruction of Moab to the idea that we should care about our neighbors, I want you to notice Verse 4: It reads, "Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you and be their shelter from the destroyer". Remember that Isaiah is writing to the Israelites of his day. He's saying to those around him, "Hey, be kind to the Moabites despite their history. They're about to be destroyed and God cares for the lives of all people." The tone of this text is that the destruction of the Moabites will be bad, so be a witness to them and help them.
 - b) OK, why should the Israelites help them when the Assyrians and later the Babylonians are going to threaten the Israelites as well? Of all things that reminds me of "survivalist" Christians who build bomb shelters to protect themselves from what they believe is the great coming destruction. My point is God never called us to isolate ourselves and only think of our own families. God wants us to care about others around us and be a witness to them. Do we mess up? All the time. Still, when we do apologize and we're willing to be helpful to others around us.
 - c) All of that lecturing does tie to these verses. As I've mentioned in previous lessons on this book, God's going to wipe out in one night, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers right before they are about to destroy Jerusalem. We'll get to the details of that story later in this book. All I'm saying here is simply that God's calling the Israelites to be kind to their neighbors as they too are being threatened by advancing empires. That's why Verse 4 makes references to an end of the destruction that was coming soon after Isaiah wrote these verses.

11. Verse 5: In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it-- one from the house of David-- one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness.
- a) If you recall, I stated in the introduction that not everything in this chapter is about "them" but also our relationship with "them". I state that here because in Verse 5, the focus shifts from Moab back to Israel. Here we get the "Gospel preached" about a direct descendant of King David who will give justice and do the right thing. The question to me is why have this verse here and now? The last set of verses focused on Moab's ultimate destruction as a nation, so why make a statement about a descendant of King David ruling here?
 - i) First, how do we know it's not talking about something from ancient history? Back when the Assyrian Empire was threatening Moab, descendants of David were the kings of the Southern Kingdom. Couldn't this verse just be telling us that there's a good king alive or coming in spite of this? No in the sense that David's dynasty of kings came to an end within a hundred years of Isaiah's speech.
 - ii) Let me make this clear, there wasn't any time in ancient history where the world of the Middle East where they could say a descendant of King David was established in love and made decisions that affected all of the Middle East let alone the world.
 - iii) That's why I'm convinced this is another prediction of the coming of the Messiah, (i.e., Jesus) who'll be a direct descendant of King David.
 - iv) Let me put this another way: Why is the Old Testament so obsessed with the idea of the Messiah being a "man" as opposed to God? The reason is that it would take a human to be able to relate to us, and the issues we face. One of the reasons Jesus is rejected by many religious Jews is because He claimed to be God and as a whole the religious community historically in Israel expects the Messiah to be a man and not God. Of course we Christians argue that God had to become a man so that He can relate to us as humans. The Gospels go to a lot of trouble to explain that Jesus is a direct descendant of David both from his mother's side (Luke's Gospel) as well as from his father's side (Matthew's Gospel). I won't go into those details here, as I want to focus on Isaiah's point.
 - v) Speaking of which, Isaiah's point is that despite all the problems the Moab's have in their own struggle for survival, there will come one day "The Messiah" who will still rule over the world despite all the things Moab is dealing with.
 - b) Let me put this one more way before moving on. A reason to study the bible and even get involved with a bible study group is that it changes our perspective about the issues we're facing at the moment. Isaiah's been pounding the point all through this book so far that in spite of all the tragedy that the nation of Israel is facing and will face soon and despite the fact they've been collectively ignoring God, He's still going through with His plans to rule over this world one day. That same message needs to be shared with others around us as well. Therefore, God's effectively telling the Moabites as well as the Israelites that despite the tragedy that'll occur to the Moabites living east of Israel of what'll happen to them, we will still have a future day where God not only rules now over those who believe in Him, but also have a literal future day where God will literally rule the world from Israel.
 - i) Remember how I said this lesson is about us literally being a good witness to our neighbors? We're here in these chapters discussing the neighbors around Israel. In the middle of all of that discussion of future judgment, we get a reminder that God will have "The" Messiah who will rule the nation despite all those tragedies.
 - ii) Just as it was the job of the Israelites to be a living witness to those around them of the coming of the Messiah, so it's the job of Christians to be a witness to those near us as we tell others not only of the Messiah fully paying the price for our sins, but also of the fact He will (whether we like it or not) rule over our world one day. In a sense He's ruling now from heaven and will judge all people. There will also be a literal day of Him ruling from Israel and that's what we read of in these verses.

12. Verse 6: We have heard of Moab's pride-- her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and her insolence-- but her boasts are empty. ⁷ Therefore the Moabites wail, they wail together for Moab. Lament and grieve for the men of Kir Hareseth. ⁸ The fields of Heshbon wither, the vines of Sibmah also. The rulers of the nations have trampled down the choicest vines, which once reached Jazer and spread toward the desert. Their shoots spread out and went as far as the sea. ⁹ So I weep, as Jazer weeps, for the vines of Sibmah. O Heshbon, O Elealeh, I drench you with tears! The shouts of joy over your ripened fruit and over your harvests have been stilled.
- a) OK, enough of the joy of the Messiah coming, back to the reality of Moab's problems.
 - b) One has to keep in mind that for the most part the Israelites of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdom were more "anti-Moab" than "pro-Moab". This was a group that didn't respect the God of the Israelites. This was a group that tried to destroy the Israelites when they first entered the land. In the book of Ruth Chapter 4, we learn David's blood line on his mother's side came from Moab. In 1st Samuel before David became the king, he had to spend years running for his life as the previous king (Saul) was jealous of David's success. Saul spent years on and off trying to kill David. During that time David sent his family to the land of the Moabites for safety. (See 1st Samuel 22:3-4.)
 - c) My point is just that Moab has had a mixed history with the nation of Israel. When much of the Middle East was threatened by the rise of the Assyrian Empire, Moab was about to be destroyed by that empire. By now you realize my underlying lesson theme is all about caring for our neighbors. Israel's neighbor to the southeast is about to be destroyed by the upcoming invasion by the Assyrians. The text is describing the destruction of Moab with their fields and vines destroyed. One has to keep in mind that an army will often survive by living off the land they're stepping on as they travel through it.
 - d) Time for another "why should I care speech": Yes this would be horrible if I was living in that part of the Middle East 2,700 years ago more or less. The point for you and me is that all people will die one day. Some of us will die tragically young and some will live out a long life before say, we die of cancer. Either way, we have a limited time to live on here. We can choose to live for just our own pleasure or choose to live to make a difference for God in this world. I'm not saying we can't enjoy life. I'm saying that the greatest way to have joy is to use our lives to reach out to others so they too can have eternal life. That is not only sharing the gospel with others, but helping others growing in their faith or just making a difference in the life of others.
 - e) Remember that most of the Israelites at the least were indifferent to the Moabites. They've had a history with them with some positive moments as well as many negative ones. The underlying point here is that God's saying despite that history be a witness for Me, as they are about to be wiped out. In other words, it's not "good for God, I'm happy He's going to wipe them out as they deserve it for what they've done." Remember why God separated the Israelites in the first place: it wasn't because they were something great or special. It's because God wanted a group of people to be His witnesses of His existence and His love for all people to the world. (If that rings home, it should.) That's why Jesus commanded that all Christians go into the world to spread the word about what Jesus did for us.
 - f) Effectively, that's why we're reading of the Moabite doom, not so that we can say, "good riddance" to them, but that we can show love and care about someone who's about to die.
13. Verse 10: Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards; no one sings or shouts in the vineyards; no one treads out wine at the presses, for I have put an end to the shouting. ¹¹ My heart laments for Moab like a harp, my inmost being for Kir Hareseth. ¹² When Moab appears at her high place, she only wears herself out; when she goes to her shrine to pray, it is to no avail.
- a) Notice near the end of Verse 10 where it says, "I have put an end to their shouting". That's Isaiah's way of saying, life as they know it is about to end.
 - b) Now notice the beginning of Verse 11 where it says "My heart laments". There's my proof that God cares for all people and He "feels bad" about their destruction.

- c) OK, if God "laments" their destruction so much why didn't He stop it? While we're at it, we can ask, why didn't God prevent my relative or friend from dying so horribly? If He really exists, why does He allow so much pain to exist or so much evil? Remember those who don't believe in God still have to explain why evil and suffering exist. As far as why God allows it, the short version is this world is cursed by sin and all of us have to suffer to the consequences of a sin filled world. The way I look at life is that we live in God's world He has every right to do with it as He pleases, both good and bad. In effect, we're back to the point that all of us have a limited, fixed, unknown amount of time to live here and He wants us to use much of that time to make a difference for Him. Yes the Moabites will die from a horrible destruction, but in a sense so shall we die somehow and someday. That's why the real issue is what are we doing with the time God's given us.
 - d) I could give you more historical details about the destruction of those who lived in Moab at that time, but let's just say it wasn't a happy ending. So are the people living in Jordan (the nation that incorporates Moab today) the descendants of Moab? If you recall, I said it was the policy of the Assyrians to relocate survivors of the wars to other lands and put in the lands they conquered other groups. While there can be a few living there today who'd be able to trace their ancestry back to these Moabites I suspect that the vast majority of the one's living there today were from those relocated there millenniums ago.
 - e) OK, let's finish the history of the Moabites as we have two more nations to discuss here.
14. Verse 13: This is the word the LORD has already spoken concerning Moab. ¹⁴ But now the LORD says: "Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them, Moab's splendor and all her many people will be despised, and her survivors will be very few and feeble."
- a) If you've been with me through my previous Isaiah lessons, he's made a lot of predictions that won't occur until say 40 years or 100 years after he made them. He's made others that will not occur until the events of Jesus First or Second Coming. Here, Isaiah's making one that will occur in less than three years after he said it.
 - b) I want you to notice the word "contract" in Verse 14 above. Some of you reading this may have an employer who's given you a "work contract". It'd be like agreeing to go work for some person or company for exactly three years. The point is the day after that contract is expired, there is no obligation to work another day, nor will you get paid another day. It's with that picture in mind Isaiah's predicting that within three years Moab as the Israelites knew it would no longer exist. It's the end of Moab's history as an independent nation for many a century. The last part of Verse 14 says the "survivors will be very few and feeble". There's my proof that if those living in Jordan today could trace their ancestry, few would be able to go all the way back to the Moabites.
 - c) Again the point for you and me is not to learn ancient Middle East history. It is to realize we all have a fixed time to live as if God knows the "contracted time" for us to live. What God desires is that we use that time for His glory as I've beaten over our heads this lesson.
 - d) With that said, time to shift directions from the east of Israel to the north of them. That is because the next chapter focuses on the Syrians who live north of Israel. Here goes:
15. Chapter 17, Verse 1: An oracle concerning Damascus: "See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins.
- a) For bible prophecy buffs this is a famous verse. Let me give a little background and then I will explain why it's studied so much. Damascus is known in world history as maybe the oldest continually inhabited city in the world. While that fact is debated, it's definitely up there as a city that's been around for a long, long time. Yes it's the capital of the Syria and it's had a history as a city for a very long time. In fact today, it's the center of a civil war in Syria but I'll save that point for later.
 - b) Back around Isaiah's time the Assyrians (remember, a different group) did a siege against it, and wiped out the residents. However, the Assyrians that conquered that city resettled there and it continued as a city.

- c) The reason bible prophecy buffs are fascinated with this verse is they ponder if it's going to have a double fulfillment one day. Just as the Assyrians wiped it out once in the past, it is pondered whether say, a nuclear bomb will destroy it once again, or something like that as Isaiah is predicting Damascus will be a "heap of ruins". The answer is we don't know. I wouldn't want to go there today not because of Isaiah's prediction, but because there is a war happening there. When I was recently in the Northern part of Israel, I could hear the canon's firing from that city onto areas held by rebels. As I stated earlier, Israel is on the sidelines and saying to the Syrians in effect, "This is your problem and we'll stay out of it." I also know Israel is helping the wounded of that war, but that's another story.
 - d) In the meantime, this verse is God's predicting the destruction of Damascus. We'll have to wait and see whether it was just referring to the Assyrian siege of that city that occurred a short time after Isaiah wrote it, or whether or not it'll have another fulfillment in history.
16. Verse 2: The cities of Aroer will be deserted and left to flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid. ³ The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the Israelites," declares the LORD Almighty. ⁴ "In that day the glory of Jacob will fade; the fat of his body will waste away.
- a) In these verses, the scope of the coming destruction expands beyond Damascus. I called this lesson, "What about those other people over there?" Here God's saying you better do care about the destruction of Damascus, because the Assyrians aren't going to stop there.
 - b) Remember that Damascus is less than 10 miles north of the traditional border of Israel. As I said earlier, from the north end of Israel, I heard guns being fired from there onto other towns in Syria. My point is simply that Damascus is close to the Northern Israel border.
 - c) With that said, recall that a nickname for the Northern Israelite Kingdom was Ephraim. It was the name of one of Israel's 12 tribes and they were the dominant tribe in the Northern Kingdom. Also realize that "Aram" is an ancient name for what we call Syria.
 - i) All I'm saying is in these verses, Isaiah is not only predicting the fall of Damascus, he's also describing the fall of the Northern Israelite kingdom. Remember Isaiah is living in the Southern Kingdom where Jerusalem was located.
 - ii) Verse 4 has the phrase, "the day the glory of Jacob will fade". Without going into a lot of detail, it's just describing the fall of the Northern Kingdom as well as "Syria".
 - d) OK John, I can tell you're dying to give another one of your "why should I care" speeches so fire away: The underlying theme is about being a good witness to our neighbor. When we fail to do that, we fail to be a good witness for Jesus. Here we read of the North Israel Kingdom (referred to as "Jacob" the man who God renamed Israel) as they will fade away along with "Syria". That's God's little hint that when we fail to be a witness for Him it can mean we lose our "witness" just as the Northern Israelite Kingdom is decades away from officially ending it's witness for God. So are you saying God can take us "out of the game" if we fail to be a witness for Him? You bet, and it scares me enough to keep me at this! If you have any doubts, read the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts Chapter 5.
 - e) Meanwhile back to the plight of Syrian and the Northern Kingdom:
17. Verse 5: It will be as when a reaper gathers the standing grain and harvests the grain with his arm-- as when a man gleanes heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. ⁶ Yet some gleanings will remain, as when an olive tree is beaten, leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches, four or five on the fruitful boughs," declares the LORD, the God of Israel.
- a) If you've been with me so far through this book you'd picked up on the fact that one thing Isaiah loves to use colorful illustrations people could relate to, in order to describe what is the horrible damage that's about to occur. In that time, in order to pick olives off of a tree, you'd shake or beat the tree for the olives to fall. Another illustration is if one cuts wheat, you'd always miss some as it's easy to do. The point is just as a wheat field will be mostly empty after it's cut down or an olive tree won't have much fruit left after it's beaten, so the Syrians will be few in number after the invasion.

- b) So why doesn't Isaiah just say they'll be few in number? Part of it is to paint a picture of a complete destruction in language people of that day could relate to. The point for Isaiah's audience in the Southern Kingdom is effectively, "If you fail to be a good witness for God, this is what can happen to you just as it is (done deal) going to happen up north!"
18. Verse 7: In that day men will look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel. ⁸ They will not look to the altars, the work of their hands, and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles and the incense altars their fingers have made. ⁹ In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation.
- a) Even though this dirge started off focusing on Damascus, one can easily tell that the focus is back on Israel and in particular the Northern Kingdom. Let me put it this way, back in the city of Damascus in those days, I'm sure they were looking toward their false gods for protection. Yet in Verse 7 it says men will look to the Holy One of Israel.
- b) One has to keep in mind the main reason why God is destroying the Northern Kingdom. Yes, they failed to be a witness for Him to others around them, but also realize they have committed a related sin, by collectively abandoning God in order to worship idols.
- c) In the ancient world, to abandon one's gods was unheard of. Yet the Northern Kingdom was destroyed because from the king on down, the entire nation for generations had left the worship of the true God for idols.
- d) I have to admit that it's always amazed me when I see people who I know don't make any significant effort to worship God get into real trouble and then all of sudden look to Him for help. I admit I picture God saying, "Hey nice to hear from you, it's been awhile." I say that because the Northern Israelite Kingdom collectively abandoned God since they were formed. In the bible, there are no good kings listed in the book of Kings up north.
- e) With all that in mind, it's amazing to realize God's saying, "OK, that did it. It's been a few hundred years and you people aren't getting any better. Time for the big wipe out!" So if they got a few hundred years, can I breath easy that God will be easy on me or my nation or community? My philosophy is why push it? I'm convinced that when we'll get judged by God, His question for believers is what have you done about it? I don't think we'll get punished as believers, but I'm convinced there will be a lack of rewards when we fail to be a witness and live as He desired. Stop to consider how hard Paul worked after he became a believer. Now there's a model for what God's called us to do.
- i) OK, what should I do? What do you enjoy doing? What are you good at? What'll bring you joy by doing for God? Half the fun of being a witness for Jesus is finding a ministry to get involved with that one enjoys doing. As I also like to say, we still have to do our "duty" and it's not all what we love to do. I remind myself of this as I take the trash out as if to say, sometimes we do what has to be done and not just what we love to do to make a difference for God.
- ii) With that convicting thought hanging over us, back to Isaiah.
19. Verse 10: You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress. Therefore, though you set out the finest plants and plant imported vines, ¹¹ though on the day you set them out, you make them grow, and on the morning when you plant them, you bring them to bud, yet the harvest will be as nothing in the day of disease and incurable pain.
- a) The point here is Isaiah's criticizing those who have been called by God (The Israelites) as they've forgotten God. As I've stated in earlier lessons, the Northern Kingdom was living at a time of prosperity before the invasion hit. The idea is we can be so busy enjoying the ways God has blessed us and we forget to take the time to honor Him as God and forget to use our lives to make a difference for Him. With that thought in mind, Isaiah compares Israel to a "fruitless" grape vine. Isaiah's describing a time of disease and pain, when all of them were busy enjoying their lives and ignoring God. OK John, I'd hate to be in there at that time. What does that have to do with you and me?

- b) We can be living in a time of prosperity or a time of struggling. We all realize we don't know what tomorrow will bring, but most of us plan for the most likely things to occur. This is not a lecture on doing more for God. This is a lecture on realizing God should be the center of our lives in all that we do. If you've got that, you've begun to understand how it is God wants us to live as a witness for Him.
 - c) Meanwhile I've got three more verses talking about the upcoming destruction of Syria (i.e., Damascus and the surrounding territory) as well as the Northern Israelite Kingdom.
20. Verse 12: Oh, the raging of many nations-- they rage like the raging sea! Oh, the uproar of the peoples-- they roar like the roaring of great waters! ¹³ Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters, when he rebukes them they flee far away, driven before the wind like chaff on the hills, like tumbleweed before a gale. ¹⁴ In the evening, sudden terror! Before the morning, they are gone! This is the portion of those who loot us, the lot of those who plunder us.
- a) Here we can see the scope of this dirge has expanded from more than just Damascus and the nearby cities of the Northern Israelite kingdom to people in general. It's as if Isaiah is trying to warn all people that you don't realize the danger your in. Yes of course he could be just focusing on that region where the Assyrian Empire is about to wipe out cities one by one. One of the things I read in my studies of this era was that some cities would have everyone commit suicide rather than be taken captive by this Empire. My point is just to paint a picture of how horrible it was for this big army to come knocking on our doorstep.
 - b) This comes back to the tough reality that life is hard for most people. Many nations in the history of the world have had to face destruction due to wars and men's desire to conquer and take over other places. However, notice how Isaiah ties the idea of this type of horror to the idea of "God rebuking them" (See Verse 13). Picture having to live through a tragic time like this and thinking, why isn't God helping us? The answer for those from a Jewish background is they're being punished for ignoring Him as Israel was called to be a living witness for Him. As for non-Israelites, this is God's reminder of the obvious fact there is a God who created everything and because you've (other nations) collectively ignored what should be obvious, it'll feel like God Himself is punishing you for ignoring Him.
 - c) Let me try to make this simple: There's an eternal punishment for turning from God all of one's life. Life can be going well and one can have prosperity. In a moment all of that can change. That's sort of the point here. It can feel like God's punishing us for ignoring Him when suffering does occur. The reality is when we turn from Him and try to live as if He didn't exist we will suffer for it, as all of us have to face the horrid reality of death.
 - i) Which surprisingly leads back to being a witness to our neighbors for Jesus. Yes we as Christians are free to do whatever we want. The question to ponder is what do we want to do with our time? If we believe Jesus did die for every sin we ever have or will commit, why aren't we sharing that fact with others. Even if others do understand that fact, the real question becomes, what are we doing about it? That is what God desires, an intimate relationship with Him and letting Him guide our lives for His glory.
 - ii) All of that ties to these verses, because they're describing what happens to people who choose to turn from God with their lives. Now that I've beaten that point to death, time for the last nation group of this lesson.
21. Chapter 18, Verse 1: Woe to the land of whirring wings along the rivers of Cush, ² which sends envoys by sea in papyrus boats over the water. Go, swift messengers, to a people tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers.
- a) The first thing to realize is that this group is not exactly Ethiopia as we know it today. It's the Southern parts of Egypt, which is a high elevation area. It's the water sources for the Nile River. The ancient name is the rivers (or streams) of Cush, but it's talking about the same place. The question of course, is why is God bringing up this nation now?

- b) The more I thought about it, the more I came back to my main lesson theme about being called to be a good witness for God. Sometimes it means being a living witness to those living near us. Sometimes it means traveling to distant lands. That's why most churches do support missionaries going out around the world to be witnesses for Jesus. Personally I see this chapter as God giving an example of a distant land that Israel's had a long term established history with, for them to be His witnesses to them.
 - c) Before I move on, there are a couple more strange word pictures that I should explain the meaning before I move on. Verse 1 says, "the land of whirring wings". The Southern part of Egypt and the northern part of Ethiopia today was historically known as this, because the water sources were filled with dragonflies and other insects that buzz around the area where these streams and rivers were located. Remember that most Israelites didn't know of geography by maps, so they used word pictures to associate certain places.
 - d) The second reference I want to point out is boats made of papyrus. If you know anything about the Nile River is that it is full of papyrus plants. The point is just that the Ethiopians (to keep the name simple) would make boats out of them and travel down the river.
 - e) The third thing to point out from these verses is that God is calling this group to go be a witness to "to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers". Here is where bible experts are divided. Some think Isaiah is referring to Egypt as they're next to Ethiopia and Egypt was still a big power in the region as they have been for millenniums. Other commentators think it might be referring to the Assyrians as they're still the big threat at that time. There's a famous historical moment in ancient Middle East history when the Babylonians defeated Egypt in a major war around 600 BC and Egypt never became the great world power that again, it was for millenniums.
 - i) My point is simply that during Isaiah's time, both Egypt and Assyrians were both great powers feared "far and wide". Both were aggressive nations and both Egypt and Iraq are well known as being divided by rivers. While a few other references are tough to relate to, I personally think this refers to Egypt as they're next door to "Ethiopia" which at the time of the bible included parts of Southern Egypt.
 - f) I said in the introduction that this chapter is considered by scholars to be one of the most trivia in the bible. Scholars ponder, why would the God of the Israelites care about what I'll call the Ethiopians being a good witness to the Egyptians? The next chapter will focus on the Egyptians themselves. That's another clue that we are talking about the Egyptians when the text refers to things like a "feared people" and "land that rivers divide".
 - g) To answer that, realize that in effect God's had a relationship with "Ethiopia" going all the way back to Moses. For example, Numbers 12:1 says Moses took a dark skinned wife. For a number of reasons scholars speculate she probably came from "Ethiopia". All I'm saying is Israel has had a history with this nation going back to Moses. Another example is in the story of Phillip preaching to an Ethiopian official as was he was going back home from his visit to Jerusalem. In modern times, there's a famous story of the nation of Israel rescuing a good size Jewish group out of Ethiopia when they faced persecution. My point is simply the area of Southern Egypt and Ethiopia had a long-term relationship with the Israelites.
 - h) This leads back to the big question: Why is God bringing them up here and now and why are they called to be a witness to the Egyptians? Even if my location references are wrong I think the key point comes back to being a witness for God and that witness spreading to areas around the world. My proof is in the next few verses.
22. Verse 3: All you people of the world, you who live on the earth, when a banner is raised on the mountains, you will see it, and when a trumpet sounds, you will hear it.
- a) In Chapter 13, Isaiah used a reference to raising a banner on a hilltop so that many people could see it. It's his way of saying spread the word about something. In a similar fashion, Isaiah refers making a trumpet sound from a place where noise carries far, like say at the top of a hill. The point here is when this "event" happens, it will be noticed.

- b) OK, I'll bite: What is the event Isaiah is talking about? The answer is in Verse 7, so hang in there and I'll get to that question in a moment.
 - c) Remember that this chapter is written to those living in "Ethiopia". All I'm saying is God wants to use them to be a witness to Egypt. Why them and not Israel? Maybe because of their history with Egypt. Whatever the reason, God's calling on them to be a witness.
 - d) Realize there have been Jewish people living there for millenniums. This is God saying in effect, to those I've called, even those living in distant lands, just because you're not living in Israel, doesn't mean you can't use your life for My glory. I want all who've I've called to be a witness for Me where you are and to others near you.
 - e) That's why I believe this chapter is here to show us that being a witness for God applies to wherever we are and wherever God's called us to be a witness for Him. With that said we only have four more verses to go, let's get back at it.
23. Verse 4: This is what the LORD says to me: "I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place, like shimmering heat in the sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."
- a) All Verse 4 is telling us that God is watching over His people wherever they are, and He's going to work in the "background" as the locals will not realize God's working there then.
 - b) The next few verses will talk about how God is working there.
24. Verse 5: For, before the harvest, when the blossom is gone and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives, and cut down and take away the spreading branches. ⁶ They will all be left to the mountain birds of prey and to the wild animals; the birds will feed on them all summer, the wild animals all winter.
- a) OK, what is this all about? It appears to be describing a great destruction in the land that the Ethiopians were called to go witness to. In the beginning of this chapter, God said to them to go to this powerful nation by their papyrus boats and be a witness to them. Here in these verses we learn the message they are to spread: Destruction is coming and it will be bad. Again, one has to keep in mind that Egypt was a very powerful entity within that region for millenniums. About one hundred years after Isaiah wrote this, Egypt is about to see it's great power come to an end. Egypt still existed after the Babylonians rose up to power, but Egypt was never a great power again after that defeat. Am I 100% positive the text here is describing that event? No, and that's why scholars refer to this chapter as one of the toughest to understand in the bible. However, given history at that time, it appears to be what Isaiah is asking the "Ethiopians" to do or at least His people in that area.
25. Verse 7: At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD Almighty from a people tall and smooth-skinned, from a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers-- the gifts will be brought to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty.
- a) Remember I asked a few verses ago about when was this going to happen? The "when" is described here in Verse 7. The short version is it's "end times" and it's future to us.
 - b) So were gifts brought from "Ethiopia" to Israel at that time? The truth is we don't much of any historical evidence on this. It could refer to some event lost in history, or there is also the possibility it refers to a future event. Notice that those living where the divided rivers are located bring the gifts. Whoever this is talking about, is now a Muslim based country that brings gifts to Jerusalem. I can't think of anything historical that describes that event.
 - c) The point is God has His witnesses and calls us to be a witness to Him in places outside of Israel and they (and us) are to be a living witness for Him.
 - d) As to the specific event described here, I suspect this is end times simply because one can't find any historical event of a "people tall and smooth skinned" bringing gifts to Jerusalem. Let me put it this way, if it is Egypt, they've never honored Israel that way. If it's referring to say Iraq, where the Assyrians and the Babylonians were based, let's be honest, they've never had a positive and friendly relationship with Israel in all of their history and as well as today.

- e) Let me sum up this prediction with what we do know. When the Messiah comes to rule the world from Jerusalem, even its traditional enemies will be forced to honor Him as the ruler over the world. That's basic Christian "end-time" theology. I believe the reason why Isaiah states this chapter here, is because Israel was and is threatened by larger empires in the region and this is Isaiah's way of saying God will win in the end no matter what we've got to face at any given moment.
 - f) The message to you and me is that no matter what happens in our life, God's going to win His way and His timing in the end. Yes we may suffer in this lifetime, but that should not prevent us from being a witness for Him, wherever we are, and whenever we're called to be a witness for Him. If you've got that, you've understand these four chapters.
 - g) With that said, I'm running long and it's time to close in prayer.
26. Father, first we thank You that You have separated us and called us to be a living witness for You in all that we do. We face difficulties in our lives and we ask that You make it obvious to us as to what it is You want us to do as we live to make a difference for You. Help us to draw upon Your power so that we can make that difference and use our time for Your glory. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.