

Session 17

Isaiah 17:1-14 | The Burden of Damascus and the Fading Glory of Jacob

Isaiah Oracle by Oracle / Dr. Randy White

Isaiah 17 belongs to the larger collection of burdens against nations and cities in Isaiah 13:1-23:18. Although the heading names Damascus, the oracle quickly joins Syria with Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel. That pairing follows the historical alliance already confronted in Isaiah 7: Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel joined forces against Jerusalem. The allies that tried to terrify Judah would themselves be diminished by the Assyrian power upon which Ahaz relied. Yet judgment is not the final word. A remnant turns from man-made worship to the Holy One of Israel, and the chapter ends with the LORD rebuking the roaring nations that plunder His people.

The fall of Damascus and the fading of Israel's glory (vv.17:1-6)

- **Verse 1 — The burden of Damascus announces the overthrow of Syria's capital.** Damascus was one of the ancient world's important cities and the political center of the Aramean kingdom commonly called Syria in the KJV. Isaiah does not isolate the city from the conflict of chapters 7-8; he announces the collapse of the power that had allied with Ephraim against Judah.
- **"Damascus is taken away from being a city" and "it shall be a ruinous heap" predict real physical devastation.** Isaiah does not merely say that Damascus will lose political influence or undergo a change of government. The city itself is pictured as broken down by conquest and reduced from an inhabited urban center to fallen ruins.
- **The verse does not, however, say that Damascus can never be rebuilt or inhabited again.** Scripture adds explicit language when permanent desolation is the point. Deuteronomy 13:16 says of an unnamed apostate Israelite city, **"it shall not be built again."** Joshua 8:28 calls the Canaanite city of Ai **"an heap for ever."** Isaiah 25:2 describes an unnamed enemy city, called **"a city of strangers,"** as **"a ruinous heap"** and then adds, **"it shall never be built."** Isaiah 17:1 contains no corresponding expression such as **forever, never inhabited, or never built again.**

- **A heap can later become the site of a rebuilt city.** Jeremiah 30:18 promises that **"the city shall be builded upon her own heap."** Micah 3:12 foretells that Jerusalem will **"become heaps,"** a prophecy quoted in Jeremiah 26:18; Jerusalem's later rebuilding shows that becoming heaps does not by itself mean permanent nonexistence.
- The safest reading therefore affirms both parts of the wording: Damascus would suffer genuine urban destruction and cease functioning as Syria's royal city, but Isaiah 17:1 alone does not require that its site remain empty for all subsequent history.
- **The near historical fulfillment came through Assyria.** Second Kings 16:9 records that Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria took Damascus, carried its inhabitants captive to Kir, and killed Rezin. This occurred during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, conventionally dated to about 732 BC.
- Isaiah had already foretold that the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria would be carried before the king of Assyria (Isaiah 8:4). Isaiah 10:9 later names Damascus among cities Assyria boasted of conquering. Chapter 17 therefore continues an established prophecy rather than introducing an unrelated future war.
- **Some modern prophecy teaching goes beyond what the verse establishes.** The continued existence of modern Damascus does not prove that Isaiah 17:1 remains wholly unfulfilled, because the verse never says the city could not be rebuilt. Isaiah 8:4, Isaiah 10:9, and 2 Kings 16:9 place a real judgment upon Damascus in the Assyrian period. A teacher may argue for a further prophetic application, but should not do so merely by adding **"never rebuilt"** to a text that does not say it.
- **Verse 2 — The cities of Aroer are abandoned to undisturbed flocks.** Human government and defense disappear so completely that grazing animals occupy places formerly inhabited by people.
- **The location creates an interpretive difficulty.** The best-known Aroer lay near the Arnon in Transjordan, south of Damascus and closely associated with territory east of the Jordan (Numbers 32:34; Deuteronomy 2:36; Joshua 13:16). Another Aroer lay in Ammonite territory (Joshua 13:25), and a southern Aroer appears in 1 Samuel 30:28. No securely identified Syrian Aroer resolves the question.
- The plural **"cities of Aroer"** may describe settlements in the broader Transjordanian territory affected when Assyria moved against Syria and Israel. The oracle's reach is already wider than the city of Damascus alone, and verse 3 will explicitly include Ephraim.
- **"They shall be for flocks"** reverses normal civic life. Streets and fields once guarded by men become open pasture, and the animals lie down because **"none shall make them afraid."** The absence of fear for the flock signals the absence of the human population.
- Because the textual and geographical question is difficult, the safest conclusion is the verse's unmistakable point: populated and defended places connected with the Syrian-Israelite sphere will be emptied by judgment.
- **Verse 3 — Syria and Ephraim lose their strength together.** The alliance formed against Judah does not preserve either partner; their shared policy leads into shared humiliation.
- **"The fortress also shall cease from Ephraim"** moves the oracle directly from Damascus to the northern kingdom.

- Ephraim often stands for the ten-tribe kingdom because it was its dominant tribe.
- **"The kingdom from Damascus"** announces the end of Syria's independent royal power. Rezin's death and the Assyrian annexation of Damascus fulfilled this historically (2 Kings 16:9).
 - **"The remnant of Syria"** shows that judgment does not require every Syrian individual to perish. A surviving population remains, but it possesses no former imperial glory.
 - **"They shall be as the glory of the children of Israel"** is ironic in context. Israel's glory is itself about to fade, as verses 4-6 explain. Syria's remnant will resemble the diminished condition of its former ally, not the splendor of Israel under David and Solomon.
 - Isaiah 7:4 had called Rezin and Pekah **"two tails of these smoking firebrands."** Their apparent fire was already burning out. Isaiah 17 explains the same reversal on a larger scale.
 - **Verse 4 — Jacob's glory becomes thin and weak.** The oracle turns from Syria's capital to the bodily wasting of the northern kingdom.
 - **"In that day"** marks the appointed time of judgment described throughout the passage. It does not by itself demand that every use in the chapter occur at one moment without near and far prophetic horizons.
 - **"The glory of Jacob shall be made thin"** personifies the northern kingdom as a formerly well-fed man whose body wastes away. Political strength, population, wealth, and confidence disappear together.
 - **"The fatness of his flesh shall wax lean"** continues the picture of severe reduction. What looked prosperous and substantial would become weak and spare under invasion and deportation.
 - The name **Jacob** recalls the nation's covenant ancestry while exposing the humiliation of his descendants. Covenant identity did not shield an unbelieving generation from covenant judgment.
 - **Verse 5 — Israel is harvested like grain in the valley of Rephaim.** The image changes from a wasting body to a field cut down by a reaper.
 - The reaper gathers standing grain with his arm and cuts the ears. The picture emphasizes purposeful removal rather than accidental decline: the population is reaped from the land.
 - **"The valley of Rephaim"** was a fertile valley near Jerusalem, southwest of the city (Joshua 15:8; 2 Samuel 5:18-25). Its grain fields supplied Isaiah's hearers with a familiar picture of a thorough harvest.
 - The comparison does not relocate Ephraim into Judah. A familiar Judean harvest scene illustrates what the Assyrian conqueror would do to the northern kingdom.
 - Second Kings 15:29 records the first stage: during Pekah's reign, Tiglath-pileser seized northern Israelite territories and deported their inhabitants. Second Kings 17:6 records the subsequent fall of Samaria, the northern kingdom's capital, and the larger Assyrian captivity. The harvesting image can embrace this progressive stripping of the kingdom.
 - **Verse 6 — A small gleanings survives the harvest.** Judgment reduces Jacob drastically, but a few survivors remain.
 - **"Gleaning grapes"** in the KJV introduces the general principle of remnants left after harvest, but the detailed comparison is to the beating of an olive tree. The main crop has been removed, while a few olives remain beyond the gatherer's first reach.
 - **"Two or three berries in the top of**

the uppermost bough" and "four or five in the outmost fruitful branches" portray a sparse but real remnant. The small numbers emphasize how complete the judgment will be.

- The olive harvest was beaten or shaken so that ripe fruit fell for gathering (Deuteronomy 24:20). The law commanded Israel not to go over the branches a second time but to leave what remained for the stranger, fatherless, and widow. Isaiah uses the familiar sight of scattered fruit to portray scattered survivors.

- This remnant should not automatically be treated as spiritually faithful merely because it survives. Verses 7-8 will describe a genuine turning to the LORD, but biblical remnant language can refer either to physical survivors or to the believing portion among them; context must establish the distinction.
- The verse closes with **"saith the LORD God of Israel."** Israel's own covenant God, not Assyria's gods or military genius, determines both the severity of the harvest and the preservation of what remains.

A remnant turns to the Holy One of Israel (vv.17:7-8)

- **Verse 7 — Judgment turns man's eyes back to his Maker.** The collapse of false strength produces a renewed recognition of the God Israel had forgotten.
 - **"At that day shall a man look to his Maker"** uses the singular man representatively. The promise concerns people within the judged population who cease looking to alliances, fortresses, idols, and their own achievements.
 - **"His Maker"** emphasizes God's rightful ownership and authority. Israel is not free to invent its own worship or seek security apart from the One who formed the nation (Isaiah 43:1, 15; 44:2).
 - **"His eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel"** means he will look toward the LORD with regard, dependence, and reverence. The title **Holy One of Israel** is especially characteristic of Isaiah and joins God's absolute holiness to His covenant relationship with Israel.
 - Isaiah 8:13 had already commanded Judah, **"Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear."** Isaiah 17:7 shows the proper response after human sources of security have failed.
- **Hezekiah later issued just such an invitation to the Assyrian remnant.** He sent messengers through Ephraim, Manasseh, and the other northern tribes, saying, **"Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria"** (2 Chronicles 30:6). Many mocked, but people from Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 30:10-11). This supplies a plausible near historical expression of Isaiah 17:7: survivors of Assyrian judgment turned again to Israel's Maker.
 - The verse preserves hope within judgment. The nation is made lean, but God uses the stripping away of false glory to turn a remnant's attention back to Himself.
- **Verse 8 — Turning to the LORD includes turning away from manufactured worship.** The inward direction of the eyes in verse 7 produces an outward rejection of idolatrous objects in verse 8.

- **"He shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands"** exposes the contradiction of idolatry. Man fashions an object and then treats the thing he made as though it could save its maker (Isaiah 2:8; 44:9-20).
- The phrase **"that which his fingers have made"** deliberately contrasts verse 7. The worshiper must choose between looking to his divine Maker and looking to what the worshiper's own hands have made.
- **"The groves" is the KJV's translation of the plural Hebrew *asherim*, related to *Asherah*.** The KJV chose a concrete English term that fits the way Scripture describes these cultic objects or plantings. Israel could **plant** a grove beside an altar (Deuteronomy 16:21), **cut down** the groves (Exodus 34:13; Judges 6:25), use the wood of a cut grove as fuel for burning a sacrifice (Judges 6:26), **burn** a grove and stamp it to powder (2 Kings 23:6), and **pluck up** the groves (Micah 5:14). These actions show something materially connected with trees or wood and devoted to forbidden worship, not merely the abstract name of a goddess.
- **The KJV's word does not mean that every occurrence must describe an ordinary cluster of shade trees.** A grove could be a sacred tree, a planted cultic site, or a wooden object associated with Asherah worship. The rendering preserves the physical, vegetative character indicated by the biblical verbs while allowing the form to vary by context.
- Many modern versions simply transliterate the word as **Asherim**, which names the cult but leaves an English reader dependent upon outside explanation. Others use **"Asherah pole."** That may describe some occurrences, but it is too narrow when treated as a definition for every passage: Scripture itself speaks of planting, cutting down, burning, and plucking up the object. **"Groves"** therefore communicates more of the Bible's own physical description than an untranslated religious name, while **"poles"** can import a specific manufactured form that the individual text does not always establish.
- **"The images" translates the Hebrew *ḥammānîm*, whose exact physical form is uncertain.** Older lexicons connect the word with *ḥammâ*, **sun**, and therefore call them **sun-images** or **sun-pillars**—upright cultic objects erected in honor of the sun. Many modern lexicons and translations instead understand them as **incense altars** or **incense stands**. The biblical occurrences establish that they were physical objects belonging to idolatrous worship: they could be removed (2 Chronicles 14:5), cut down and broken in pieces (2 Chronicles 34:4, 7), and broken or abolished along with false altars (Leviticus 26:30; Isaiah 27:9; Ezekiel 6:4, 6). Isaiah 17:8 does not identify their shape or the deity represented, so the KJV's broader **"images"** appropriately avoids deciding between a sun-pillar and an incense altar. The essential point is that the remnant will cease looking to cultic objects made by human fingers.
- The response to Hezekiah's Passover invitation also corresponds closely with this verse. After the observance, the gathered Israelites broke the images, cut down the groves, and removed the high places and altars in Judah, Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh (2 Chronicles 31:1). Their actions joined renewed respect for the LORD with the destruction of worship made by human hands.
- Israel had repeatedly combined profession of the LORD with forbidden worship. Second Kings 17:7-18 identifies high places,

images, groves, Baal worship, heavenly worship, and rejection of God's statutes as causes of the northern kingdom's fall.

- The promised change is therefore not vague

spirituality. The remnant looks specifically to the Holy One of Israel and abandons rival worship produced by human hands.

Forgotten God, failed planting, and rebuked nations (vv.17:9-14)

- **Verse 9 — Israel's defended cities become deserted like places abandoned in an earlier conquest.** The verse returns from the remnant's conversion to the desolation that produced it.
 - **The KJV's "forsaken bough" and "uppermost branch" continue the woodland imagery,** picturing strong cities left empty like isolated places in a forest. The underlying Hebrew is difficult and can also be understood as abandoned places in the wooded height and hilltop.
 - **"Which they left because of the children of Israel"** most naturally recalls the Canaanite inhabitants who abandoned cities before Israel during the conquest. Isaiah announces a covenant reversal: Israel's own strong cities will now resemble the deserted places once left for Israel to possess.
 - Deuteronomy 6:10-12 warned Israel that it would receive cities it had not built, houses it had not filled, and vineyards it had not planted, but must not forget the LORD. Verse 10 says Israel did precisely what Moses warned against; forgotten grace leads to forfeited security.
 - The comparison need not identify one particular abandoned Canaanite city. Its force lies in the reversal: the people who inherited deserted strongholds will see their own strongholds deserted.
 - **"There shall be desolation"** states the result without qualification. Military strength cannot preserve cities whose covenant foundation has been abandoned.
- **Verse 10 — Israel's fundamental sin is forgetting the God of salvation.** The failed harvest of verse 11 begins with failed memory and misplaced trust in verse 10.
 - **"Thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation"** is covenant language. Israel's sin was not ignorance of an unknown God but neglect and rejection of the God who had redeemed, preserved, and instructed the nation.
 - **This covenant charge should be distinguished from Paul's exhortations to the Body of Christ.** Israel is repeatedly accused of having **"forgotten the God of thy salvation"** (Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 17:10). Paul never accuses the Body of Christ of forgetting God in that covenant sense. Instead, he exhorts believers to stand fast in grace, hold fast the gospel, and walk worthy of their calling (Galatians 5:1; 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Ephesians 4:1; Philippians 1:27). Those exhortations reflect the believer's position in Christ rather than Israel's covenant obligations.
 - **"The rock of thy strength"** identifies the LORD as Israel's stable defense. Deuteronomy 32:15-18 similarly charges Jeshurun with forsaking the God who made him and lightly esteeming the Rock of his salvation.
 - Forgetting God is practical rather than merely mental. Ephraim remembered foreign alliances, cultivated imported worship, and strengthened visible defenses while living as though the LORD were

irrelevant.

- **"Therefore"** makes the failed planting judicial. The agricultural disappointment is not bad luck; it is the consequence of abandoning the only true source of salvation and strength.
- **"Pleasant plants"** may describe carefully cultivated gardens, and **"strange slips"** are imported vine shoots or cuttings. The imagery represents costly effort invested in what is foreign rather than in covenant faithfulness.
- **Paul de Lagarde proposed, and T. K. Cheyne developed, a connection with ritual gardens of Adonis.** The interpretation is also discussed in Charles Ellicott's commentary and by J. Skinner in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*. These gardens used rapidly cultivated vegetation that soon withered, making them an appealing parallel to verses 10-11; the Syrian association of Adonis also fits the chapter's setting. The identification remains disputed, however. Isaiah does not name Adonis, and the Hebrew can be read simply as pleasant plants and imported vine slips. The safer point is explicit: Israel cultivates attractive foreign growth after forgetting the LORD.
- The strange planting can encompass both foreign religion and foreign policy. Israel sought life through the practices and powers of surrounding nations, but neither imported worship nor international alliance could produce a secure harvest.
- **Verse 11 — Intensive cultivation produces grief instead of harvest.** Human skill can force impressive early growth, but it cannot secure the outcome when God brings judgment.
 - **"In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow"** and **"in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish"** portray
- rapid, carefully managed success. Israel's schemes appear to work at first.
- The speed is part of the irony. What blossoms in the morning does not necessarily endure until harvest. Early visible success is not proof of divine approval.
- **"The harvest shall be a heap"** describes the crop collapsing into ruin rather than being gathered as lasting abundance. The planting ends in loss at the very point when profit was expected.
- **"In the day of grief and of desperate sorrow"** shows that the loss cannot be repaired by further cultivation. The final expression carries the sense of incurable or grievous pain.
- Hosea 8:7 gives the same covenant principle: **"They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind."** Galatians 6:7 later states the universal moral rule that a man reaps what he sows, but Isaiah applies it specifically to Israel's forgotten God and foreign planting.
- **Verse 12 — The roar of invading nations sounds like the sea.** The prophecy expands from Syria and Ephraim to the imperial multitude that overwhelms lands and peoples.
 - **"Woe to the multitude of many people"** introduces a new movement. The judged alliance of Damascus and Ephraim gives way to the greater Gentile power that God uses as an instrument and then judges for its own pride and violence.
 - Isaiah compares the nations to **"the rushing of mighty waters."** A single wave can be resisted, but the roar of the sea conveys immense, restless, and apparently uncontrollable force.
 - Isaiah 8:7-8 had already pictured Assyria as the strong and many waters of the river overflowing its banks and reaching even into Judah. The water imagery makes

the Assyrian host the most natural near historical referent here.

- The plural **nations** and **peoples** allows a broader horizon. Ancient empires gathered many subject peoples into their armies, and the image also supplies a prophetic pattern for the final gathering of nations against God's purposes (Psalm 2:1-6; Zechariah 12:2-9).
- **Verse 13 — The LORD's rebuke turns the roaring host into weightless refuse.** The apparent strength of the sea disappears before one divine command.
 - The nations rush like many waters, **"but God shall rebuke them."** The contrast is the theological center of the closing vision: what no human army can silence is scattered by God's word.
 - **"The chaff of the mountains"** reflects threshing floors placed on exposed heights where wind could carry away the loosened husks. The invading multitude looks massive while approaching, but under divine judgment it has no weight or rootedness.
 - **"A rolling thing before the whirlwind"** describes dry, detached material driven helplessly by violent wind. Whether one pictures tumbleweed, thistle-down, or another windblown object, the point is total loss of direction and control.
 - Isaiah 29:5 similarly says the multitude of Jerusalem's strangers will become like small dust and passing chaff, and Psalm 83:13 asks God to make hostile nations like a wheel or whirling thing before the wind.
 - The verse reverses the imagery deliberately: the nations first resemble an irresistible flood, but after God's rebuke they resemble weightless chaff. Their power was never equal to His.
- **Verse 14 — Evening terror disappears before morning.** The oracle closes with the sudden overthrow of those who spoil God's people.
 - **"At eveningtide trouble"** pictures the moment when destruction appears imminent. Darkness intensifies fear because the threatened people cannot see how deliverance could come.
 - **"Before the morning he is not"** announces a reversal too rapid for ordinary military explanation. The enemy that dominated the evening has vanished by dawn.
 - The destruction of Sennacherib's army provides a striking historical correspondence. Isaiah 37:36 says the angel of the LORD struck the Assyrian camp, and when men arose early in the morning they found the host filled with dead bodies. Isaiah 17 does not name Sennacherib here, so the connection is not certain.
 - The singular **"he"** may collect the hostile multitude into one enemy or refer to the invading power as a whole. The many nations act as one spoiler and disappear under one divine rebuke.
 - **"This is the portion of them that spoil us, and the lot of them that rob us"** gives the conclusion from the standpoint of God's people. The LORD may use nations to chastise Israel and Judah, but those nations do not thereby gain permission to exalt themselves, plunder without limit, or escape judgment (Isaiah 10:5-19).
 - The chapter therefore ends beyond the fall of Damascus. Syria and Ephraim lose their glory, a remnant looks again to the Holy One, and the greater nations that roar against God's people receive their appointed portion from the LORD.

Teaching Summary

- Isaiah 17 addresses Damascus because Syria had joined Ephraim against Judah, but the oracle deliberately judges both members of that alliance.
- Assyria historically ended Damascus's independent kingdom and progressively stripped the northern kingdom of Israel, fulfilling the passage's near political horizon.
- Jacob's fading body, reaped field, and beaten olive tree all portray drastic reduction while leaving a small remnant.
- The proper fruit of judgment is a return to Israel's Maker and a rejection of altars, Asherah objects, and images made by human hands.
- Israel's deepest failure was forgetting the God of salvation and cultivating foreign sources of religious and political security.
- The roaring nations appear irresistible until God rebukes them; then the flood becomes chaff, and evening terror disappears before morning.