

The King's Judgment, Part 2

Isaiah 21-23

Michael Felkins

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Ames, Iowa

July 10, 2021

Last Sunday, Pastor Eric very beautifully covered Isaiah 13-20 and the five oracles that Isaiah prophesied against the nations that surrounded Israel. This Sunday in Isaiah 20-23, we are covering five more oracles given by Isaiah.

Like the last five, these are also oracles of judgment, but Isaiah looks through a different lens when he gives these oracles. He is looking less at the immediate future and looking more into the remote future. His prophecies not only apply to Israel's future some 250 years in the future but look far out into the future and apply to us. They warn us and equip us for living in the end times.

These oracles are like a sharp two-edged sword that cuts both ways. What I want to show you this morning is how that sword cut into the lives of the Israelites that lived in that day and how it cuts into our lives so that we can be prepared to live faithfully for Christ in our day.

In this oracle, God allowed Isaiah to see into the future. Isaiah saw five civilizations come before him. Geographically, from Babylon to Tyre, or we might say from east to west, Yahweh brings these five civilizations before him to teach him and God's people that none of them save.

Here is the bottom line, or let's say the tip of the gospel spear: *Jesus alone is our salvation*.

It is not a complicated message. However, Jesus gives us this message in the middle of a *complicated world with complex cultural issues*. Jesus comes to us with His word to give us *clarity and courage* to live in our world.

As we work through these five oracles of judgment, it can feel pretty heavy, but there is hope, and we will see it at the very end of the fifth oracle in Isaiah 23.

Let's walk through these oracles. We will make some applications along the way, but at the end, we will drive the tip of the Gospel-spear deep to equip us to hold fast to Jesus in these dark days.

Oracle #1: The first oracle of judgment is against Babylon. Babylon was on the hit list in the last set of oracles. As Pastor Eric said last Sunday, the Bible uses the city of Babylon as a symbol of corrupt earthly powers. In other words, from the *tower of Babel* in Genesis to what *the prophets* said about Babylon and all the way to *Revelation*, this city is a symbol of evil nations, kingdoms, and political powers in the world.

However, in this oracle, Isaiah was first referring to a literal Babylon and also a symbolic Babylon. But here is what we need to keep in mind. At the time of this prophecy, Babylon was not yet a world power. At the time of this oracle, Assyria was the dominate world power that was bullying the nations. As a matter of fact, Assyria had already invaded Babylon and defeated it, but they did not completely destroy it. All Assyria did was awaken the sleeping giant that would eventually become *Babylon the Great*.

Babylon would become one of the greatest military powers in the history of the world. No one would be able to stand against them.

Yet, what the sovereign Lord showed Isaiah was Babylon's rise and fall. His prophecy dealt with the fall of Babylon at the hand of the Medes. Verse 2 says, "*Lay siege, you Medes!*"

Here we see Yahweh's sovereign control of all worldly powers. World leaders and world powers may not believe in God and may think that they are in control of their own destinies, but they are not. The truth is God sovereignly controls the world.

In this oracle, we learn that the Lord raised up Babylon and then brought it to an end. Then Yahweh raised up the Medes, who brought judgment on Babylon.

This prophecy comes some 250 to 300 years before all of these things happened. It is amazing that the Lord God named these nations, for they were not yet world powers. God would use Babylon to judge Judah and then raise up the Medes to judge Babylon.

Bottom line: *God is sovereign over all nations.* This is not an ancient concept. God is still sovereign over all nations. We struggle to see it because we are in the middle of all of it, but if we had God's point of view, we would understand what He is working out in human history. What we are called to do is trust that God is sovereign over evil nations and then live our lives knowing God is sovereign.

We don't live defeated lives. We don't live lives filled with anxiety about the future. We don't live lives that are frustrated by geopolitical events. We don't live lives in hopelessness. Instead, we live in victory. We live lives of hope, telling others that God sent His Son to save sinners. We call people to trust in Christ as their only hope.

Yet, while Isaiah was talking about a literal Babylon, he was also talking about a *figurative Babylon*. Notice how he refers to Babylon in Isaiah 21:1,

*A pronouncement concerning
the desert by the sea.*

Why did God call Babylon "*the desert by the sea*?" He was being sarcastic. Babylon was not by the sea. It is landlocked in the middle of Iraq.

God's point is that Babylon and world powers like Babylon are essentially vast deserts of deadness. Life does not flourish in the desert and the "*Babylons*" of this world. They are a sea of deadness and hopelessness.

Here is the bottom line: The military might of the "*Babylons*" of this world have nothing to offer us for thriving and flourishing in life. The warning is for us to not trust in the "*Babylons*" of this world. We should not admire Babylon and invest our hopes in Babylon-like military power to protect us.

In other words, Isaiah is trying to persuade us to stop trusting in the military might of our own nation for salvation and start trusting in God. God has provided another hope and another kingdom for us that is our protection and salvation—His kingdom.

Oracle #2: The second oracle of judgment is against Edom. When you read Isaiah 21:11, it says, "*Dumah.*" It is a play on words to call *Edom, Dumah*. *Dumah* means *silence*. The oracle against *Edom* is given in vv. 11-12. Listen to what Isaiah says:

*One calls to me from Seir¹,
"Watchman, what is left of the night?
Watchman, what is left of the night?"
¹² The watchman said,
"Morning has come, and also night.
If you want to ask, ask!
Come back again."*

The people of Edom wanted to know what was going on in the world. They wanted to know if and when Assyria was about to attack them, but the Lord was silent. The watchman waited for a word, but no word came, so he told those who were asking, "*You'll have to come back later because I have no word from the Lord and no news. There is only silence.*"

Yet, we must remember that while there was no word for Edom, there is a kingdom where God is not silent—God's people. God-given has us His word and many wonderful promises.

¹ Seir is where the Edomites lived.

When Stacy and I were in Texas a couple of weeks ago, I was talking with a friend, and she told me a story about how she wanted a “word from the Lord,” but the Lord was silent. She kept looking at her surroundings, looking for a word to help her in her struggles, until she saw something in a parking lot, and she felt that was her “word from the Lord to help her in her struggle.” I told her that Jesus, in His word, had already given us His word to help us in our struggles. In Matthew 7:24-27,

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn’t collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn’t act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. It collapsed with a great crash.”

I told her that if your life is built on the Rock of Christ, that is the word of which you need to be reminded.

Brothers and sisters, God has also given us the ultimate word, the incarnate word in the Lord Jesus Christ, who went through immense suffering and remained faithful to the Lord. We can look to this Word when we need a word in our struggle. God is never silent. We have the gospel.

Listen, when we need a word, He has given us His word—the Bible. It is filled with the life of the Holy Spirit. Those are not just printed words on a page. They are Holy Spirit-inspired words. We do not have to drive around, look for signs and experiences and try to infer what the Lord is saying. We know what the Lord is saying. God is not silent; He has given us His word. So, look to the Savior and remember His life, death, and resurrection and then open His word and read it and allow the Holy Spirit to let the word of God wash over your heart.

Let me give you one more story. Some of you know I’ve been struggling with some health issues the last few weeks. To find strength, I have simply been staying in the word. I felt like my friend did and wanted a word, so instead of looking for some mystical experience, I picked up God’s word, and in my daily reading, I read Psalm 50:15,

*Call on me in a day of trouble;
I will rescue you, and you will honor me.*

That was the word I needed, and it was good for my soul. It simply reminded me to call on my Lord in the day of my trouble. I did, and He helped me. After that, I was able to share with others the reminder of Psalm 50:15, and it encouraged them. *Friends, our God is not silent with His people.* Let’s be in the word for our help in time of need but also for others in their time of need so that when they ask, “*Is there a word?*” We can answer with God’s word. We don’t have to tell them to come back later.

Oracle #3: The third oracle of judgment is against Arabia. This is the oracle against the tribes who lived in the Arabian Peninsula. This is in vv. 13-17. There seems to be another play on words in these verses. Look in v. 13:

*The oracle concerning Arabia.
In the thickets in Arabia, you will lodge,
O caravans of Dedanites.*

Old Testament scholar, Alan Harman, says that the second pronouncement of *Arabia* should most likely be translated *evening-tide*.²

In essence, Isaiah is kind of making a pun about the tribes that lived in the Arabian desert by saying they were in the *evening tide of their culture*. In other words, the sun was setting on their culture.

² Alan Harmon, *Focus on the Bible: Isaiah*, 173.

Look in vv. 16-17:

For the Lord said this to me: "Within one year, as a hired worker counts years, all the glory of Kedar will be gone. ¹⁷ The remaining Kedarite archers will be few in number." For the Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken.

Isaiah's point is that there is no salvation in any civilization. The world cultures are in decline and getting darker. There is no salvation in any nation or people group or any society of human devising.

Even our own nation seems to be in the twilight of culture. History tells us that the life span of most major world powers has been 250-300 years. We are approaching 250 years, and if we look at our society right now, we cannot deny that it is in decline.

I don't like that. I don't want that. I believe that because of the freedoms we have enjoyed over the past 246 years or so as a nation, God has been able to use the churches in America as effective instruments of spreading the gospel. However, right now, our own nation is a massive mission field. Our nation and culture seem to be in its twilight years.

Now listen to me. I'm not making a pronouncement on the U.S. This is not my point. While I appreciate the nation in which I live, I don't worship this nation. Be careful that you do not either. America may be known as the land of opportunity, but it is not, as a nation, a means of salvation.

My point is Isaiah's point. Don't put your hope in societies, cultures, or nations. Nations are not a means of salvation. Civilizations are not a means of salvation. Civilizations come and go, but only Jesus' Kingdom is eternal, and only Jesus saves.

The only Kingdom of which the sun will not set is the Kingdom where the Son is the light of the glory of God. Only those who are citizens of His Kingdom will enjoy its benefits for eternity. Only the Kingdom of Christ will last for all eternity, and only those who trust in Christ will be in that Kingdom. *The question is, are you trusting in Jesus?*

Oracle #4: The fourth oracle is against Jerusalem and the people of Judah. Isaiah 22 is the pronouncement of judgment against Jerusalem. In this oracle, Isaiah uses irony to indict God's people. Look in v. 1:

A pronouncement concerning the Valley of Vision:

What's the matter with you?

Why have all of you gone up to the rooftops?

The *Valley of Vision* is Jerusalem which also represents all of Israel. Jerusalem was the city where the priests and prophets proclaimed the visions that God had given them. Jerusalem was the heart of the nation that was supposed to teach the people and the nations about the true God. But they did not do that.

They did not listen to the words of the Lord. They did not heed the visions given by God's true prophets. Instead, they looked to their own strength and power to protect themselves. They used their own wisdom to make alliances with other nations. Look in vv. 8-11 and listen to the contrasts of how God's people responded:

⁸ *He [Yahweh] removed the defenses of Judah.*

On that day, you looked to the weapons in the House of the Forest. ⁹ You saw that there were many breaches in the walls of the city of David. You collected water from the lower pool. ¹⁰ You counted the houses of Jerusalem so that you could tear them down to fortify the wall. ¹¹ You made a reservoir between the walls for the water of the ancient pool, but you did not look to the one who made it, or consider the one who created it long ago.

The people of the *Valley of Vision* had become a *valley of blindness*. They did not look to God. They trusted in their own power and ingenuity to protect themselves. When that did not work, they just gave up.

You see, when you are supposed to be the people of God with the words of God, and you do not trust in God, then it is hopeless for you. When you lose your sense of God, then darkness is all that is left. When you lose your sense of God in this world, then you give in to the ways of the world. Then if we are not careful, we will become like the people of Jerusalem. Look in v. 13:

*But look: joy and gladness,
butchering of cattle, slaughtering of sheep and goats,
eating of meat, and drinking of wine—
“Let’s eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”*

This is not the language of the joyful party-goer but the language of those who are hopeless. They simply were going through the motions believing that there was no hope for them.

Friends, when we become blind to God’s word, then we become hopeless. We will simply go through the motions of worshipping. We will begin to join the world in their one grand final party because nothing has any meaning. We will stop living for God’s ordained Eternal-End and begin living for the weekend.

But here is what we must remember: We know what the end is. In *John’s vision of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, we know who wins in the end. This means we can live with hope in Christ as this world grows darker and darker. Jesus is our *Valley of Vision*, and it is in Him we hope so we can live for eternity no matter how bad it is.

Finally, the last part of Isaiah 22 is a pronouncement against putting our faith in celebrity leaders of Israel. *Shebna* was a famous leader in Israel who had made a name for himself, but the Lord was going to judge him. Then *Eliakim* would take his place, and he would seem to be the right man for the job. God even called him “*a peg driven in a firm place*,” but eventually, Yahweh would take him down a notch, and even he would be broken.

Bottom line: We cannot trust in fame and celebrity. This almost seems like a pronouncement of judgment that has been ripped out of the headlines. In our day, famous people seek political office simply based on their fame, although they are not qualified for office. Likewise, within Christian church culture, celebrity Christian leaders are falling left and right. Here’s the deal, fame, and celebrity do not mean you are qualified to lead.

Do not trust in leaders because of their fame and celebrity. Jesus is our Leader in whom we trust. Salvation is in Him alone, not celebrity pastors or famous leaders.

Oracle #5: The fifth and final oracle is a judgment against Tyre, and that is in Isaiah 23. Tyre was this great nation-state that used its sea power to gain wealth and prosperity. They were skilled at pulling nations into their web of control through their great sea commerce.

The seduction of power gained by wealth was so strong that no one could resist it. To align with Tyre meant Israel fed on their wealth as a parasite does to its host. However, as a host, Tyre was in control, and in reality, they had sucked Israel into their web of deception like a spider does a fly. Tyre seduced Israel away from Yahweh with wealth and prosperity.

Wealth and prosperity are major stumbling blocks for people that keep them from following Christ. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to get into heaven. Why? It is because riches and prosperity are like barbs on the end of an arrow. Once the arrow of wealth is lodged in a person’s heart and mind, it is painful to pull out without much suffering.

Let me give you a picture of what was happening for Israel if you know your geography of the nations that surrounded Israel. Babylon was to their east, and Tyre was northwest of Israel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The geography meant that Israel was sandwiched between these two great superpowers.

The power of Babylon was military land power, and Tyre was economic sea power. Babylon used force to take what they wanted, and Tyre used economic seduction.

The question is: What do we have in this picture of Babylon and Tyre together? What we have is a picture of the world’s culture in which we live. Babylon and Tyre together are like the great prostitute in Revelation 17.

While the Apostle John called the prostitute *Babylon*, Isaiah used the imagery of both nations to paint a picture that is like the great prostitute in Revelation 17:1-5. Listen to what John says:

"Come, I will show you the judgment of the notorious prostitute' who is seated on many waters. ² The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her, and those who live on the earth became drunk on the wine of her sexual immorality."³ Then he carried me away in the Spirit' to a wilderness. I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls. She had a golden cup in her hand filled with everything detestable and with the impurities of her prostitution. ⁵ On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth.

Isaiah's oracle was to call the people of God to understand the *Babylon-Tyre* powers of their world and not give in to them. Whether it is the *intimidation to give in to power* or the *seduction of the power of wealth*, we must be ready to stand firm and trust Christ alone.

Friends, we have a real enemy in Satan. These two powers of Babylon and Tyre are like two ditches we can fall into. Satan does not care whether we fall in one ditch or the other as long as we are in one of them.

He will use harsh intimidation of power to cause us to cave in our faith in Jesus, or He will use the soft seduction of wealth to lure us away from following Jesus. He does not care which one works as long as we are in one of those ditches and not following Jesus. Bottom line: this is a spiritual battle that rages in our hearts every day, but Jesus has not left us alone.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, hear the good news. We are not left to ourselves and to our own power. Jesus stepped out of heaven, and as our Redeemer, He came into our world. He did not come into our world to intimidate us. He did not come to seduce us and fool us. He did not come to give us a beat down. He came into our world and laid down His rights and became one of us yet without sin. He came and lived according to God's word so that He can be our true *Valley of Vision*. He is the One whom we look. He is our strength. He is our hope. He is our Redeemer. He gives us the *clarity* and *courage* to live in this world. He is the One who will keep us out of the ditches of the devil and on the Gospel Road.

I told you at the beginning of the sermon that the last verse of Isaiah 23 is our hope. Look in Isaiah 23:18:

But her profits and wages will be dedicated to the Lord. They will not be stored or saved, for her profit will go to those who live in the Lord's presence, to provide them with ample food and sacred clothing.

Now when you read this verse, it sounds like a verse in Proverbs that says the *"wealth of the wicked is laid up for the righteous."* However, what we must keep in mind is that all of this profit is dirty money. It was made in corrupt ways, so according to the law of Moses, it could not be dedicated to the Lord. It is useless.

Now, let me tighten the screws a little more. Do not think about it as someone else's dirty money because the fact is this dirty money is yours. It is your life. It is my life. You and I are the dirty money. We have accrued the dirty wages of our sin by prostituting ourselves with the world.

What does the letter to the Romans tell us about the wages of our sin? Romans says that the wages of our sin is death but, thanks be to God, the verse does not stop there. Paul goes on to say, *the free gift of God is eternal life for those who trust in Christ Jesus.*

This means Jesus is able to take our corruption and dirty lives and make them holy.

How did He do that? He did that by not just removing the wages of our sin but by taking our debt of sin onto Himself and paying that debt by the giving of His Holy Life on the cross. That is how God provides for His people. He took our dirty lives on Himself and gave us His holy life by dying on the cross for us.