

August 7

Scriptures: Read Isaiah 21, 22 & 23

Key Verse: “The watchman said,... Return! Come back!” (Isaiah 21:12)

Overview

Like a nightmare, Isaiah envisions the future scene of the sudden and terrible destruction of the Babylonian Empire (21:1-10), which he calls “the burden against the Wilderness of the Sea” (likely a reference to the alluvial plain of Babylon). The treacherous plunderers of Elam and Media (Persians and Medes) rushed into Babylon unexpectedly while King Belshazzar and the princes were feasting (21:5; cf. Dan. 5:1, 22-31). Isaiah saw himself as the watchman who declared the fall of Babylon (which happened in 539 B.C.) — the judgment of the Lord upon the very nation that would one day defeat Judah and take the people captive. Babylon was proud and disrespectful to the Lord. Therefore, they fell suddenly and horribly, just as it will be for the sinners in the last days (Luke 21:34-36).

The short, yet solemn prophecy against Dumah refers to Edom (Idumea) in the region of Seir. They were historical enemies of Israel and descendants of Esau. “Dumah” appears to be a play on words; the root word means “silence”, often used as a term for the place of the dead (Ps. 94:17; 115:17). Once again Isaiah is the watchman positioned by the command of the Lord to proclaim His judgment (21:6). It appears that the mockers of Seir call out to him: “what of the night” (21:11). His reply is urgent: “The morning comes...” for God’s deliverance of those who are faithfully waiting for Him and living in His Light (i.e. the Light of Jesus; cf. Rom. 13:12,14; Ps. 30:5). The Edomites are also warned that the night will come, and unless they “return” to God and repent, the night of destruction will overtake them (21:12; cf. John 9:4). Safety and life can be attained only through returning to the Lord. Every believer is to be a watchman whose responsibility and duty it is to watch and warn the lost who will come under the judgment of God (Ezk. 3:17-18 compare with Is. 56:10). Let us take this responsibility as seriously and as sincerely, as did Isaiah.

In the prophecy against Arabia (21:13-15), Isaiah gave a warning to the various Arabian tribes (descendants of Ishmael), for the Lord also desired that they return to Him and serve Him, but because they were far from Him, Isaiah predicted, as he did for Edom and many other nations, that the Assyrians would soon conquer them.

In the midst of denouncing the heathen nations, Isaiah turns to rebuke and warn the people of Jerusalem in chapter 22. He calls Jerusalem “the Valley of Vision”, possibly because there is a valley that goes through the center of the city of Jerusalem, and Isaiah received visions from the Lord there, as did other prophets. In Isaiah’s vision, he saw the coming destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, since the Lord would remove His hedge of protection from Judah (22:8); yet instead of repenting and crying out to the Lord for help (their only true defense), the people wanted to be self-sufficient and tried in vain to protect the city by increasing arms, re-fortifying the walls, and closely guarding their precious water supply (22:8-11). They also trusted in Egypt to come to their aid, and so they felt secure and continued to eat and drink, without any regard for the Lord. After all God had done for them, this was unpardonable (2:14).

To illustrate the folly and sinfulness of trusting in Egypt, Isaiah refers to two men living in his day (22:15-24; cf. 2 Kings 18:18). Shebna was an ungodly high official who built an elaborate tomb for himself, thinking he would die peacefully in his old age while at home, but Isaiah foretold that he would be demoted and taken captive to die in a foreign land. Shebna would be replaced by a godly man, Eliakim (meaning “God will establish”), who represents the faithful remnant whom the Lord will bless and establish (22:23). The final verse of chapter 22 was likely meant to serve as a warning for the descendants of the faithful who falsely supposed themselves to be secure but were unfaithful, and so they would be uprooted by the Babylonians.

Tyre, the flourishing Phoenician coastal commercial center of the ancient world, was the object of Isaiah’s final “burden” of divine judgment in chapter 23. Like the other nations, Tyre would experience God’s wrath. It was an idolatrous, materialistic society related to the people of Canaan. (Tyre was also the hometown of the wicked Jezebel, wife of Ahab, king of Israel.) They were a proud and independent people, and the rich merchants were considered honourable, even though they may have been dishonest (23:8-9). The Babylonian destruction of Tyre would be so complete that the city would be forgotten, desolate, and unprofitable for seventy years. Thereafter, Tyre will fare better under Cyrus king of Persia, but she will lose her independence and be exploited like an old prostitute that is no longer desirable yet trying to seduce the favour of her former customers. Interestingly, with each denouncement that Isaiah gives, there is a message of hope. Tyre’s material gain will one day be consecrated to the Lord, and God would bless the people of Tyre who live righteously before Him. Once again, Isaiah’s prophecy emphasizes that there will come a time when people of every nation will share in the blessings of Israel, and as the Lord would later reveal, this would come only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O Lord, Isaiah had a burden and message for other nations as well as his own. We pray that we too will have a heart for world missions. We read, O Lord, that You are “not willing that any should perish but that all would come to repentance.”