

## Isaiah 21:1-22:14 Don't Laugh when God Calls for Weeping

### **Prayer for Illumination**

O Lord our God, deal bountifully with Your servants, that we may live and keep Your Word. Open our eyes, that we may behold wondrous things out of Your law. We require wisdom as we sojourn as pilgrims in this land, so hide not your commandments from us. Our souls are consumed with longing for Your instruction at all times. You rebuke the insolent, who wander from Your commandments. O let us not wander or be moved from Your righteous paths. Even though evil should plot against us, may we meditate on your statutes. Holy Spirit make Your testimonies our delight, cause us to own Your words as our counsellors. Through Christ we pray. Amen. Read Isaiah 21:1-22:14 (Unique relationship with Babylon)

When the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean hit, the casualty count was enormous with more than 184,000 confirmed dead, and over 1.5 million people displaced. Many children were overtaken by the 30 foot wall of water. Some tragic footage was captured by a tourist in Indonesia from a balcony. Just moments before the Tsunami roared inland, the ocean receded from the shoreline, leaving shells and starfish and other creatures lying on the wet sand. Children and tourists were drawn with fascination to the sight, oblivious to the horror that would follow this curiosity. They were laughing and playing, when they should have been fleeing for their lives to higher ground. I remember seeing the footage for the first time, and wanting to yell through the TV, "Run! Run for your lives!" because I had already seen the aftermath. Here is a picture of Isaiah, crying his eyes out—"My heart staggers; horror has appalled me!"—pangs have seized him, his pain is such that he cannot hear, his dismay has his sight failing, and all because he sees the children of Judah playing on the shore,

messing about with Babylon, Dumah, and Arabia, when they should be running to God for refuge from the tsunami of Assyrian ambition. He cries to them to turn: “Turn away from your sinful alliances. Turn away from your idolatry. Turn from your sin and self-destruction. Look to the LORD and His promised Messiah.” But they just scoff and laugh him to scorn. “Stop being such a fuddy-duddy, Isaiah, and join the party.”

What we see in these chapters is that even though the LORD sent Isaiah to show Judah their sin and their need to turn to Him, they refused to see because they were confident in themselves and captive to their appetites. Jerusalem had foolishly boasted in her political machinations against Assyria, when she should have humbled herself before the LORD. Judah was blinded by pride. So sure of Babylon’s strength, and the success of the alliance of southern kingdoms, such as the Arabian tribes of Kedar and the Edomites, Judah became overconfident. This overconfidence fueled decadence, the indulgence of their desires, which only made their hearts more dull. When Isaiah brought God’s Word to them to warn against all godless alliances with the nations, such as Egypt or, in this case, Babylon, they just laughed him off as an overly zealous, old school, purist. Here we recall that when God called Isaiah, as we read in chapter six, He said that His message would have the effect of increasing the people’s hard hearing, spiritual blindness, and dullness of heart, “lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” When Isaiah asked how long this defiant condition would persist God answered, “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.” In other words, Judah would cover their ears and run headlong off of the cliff of self-willed reli-

gion. Isaiah's message regarding the overthrow of Merodach-Baladan's insurgency from Babylon by the Assyrian Empire in chapter 21, and his prophecy regarding the devastation of Judah in chapter 22, warn us to **beware of the blinding effect of self-confidence and self-indulgence, so that you always look to the LORD for true life.**

First, **beware of the blinding effect of self-confidence.** Judah believed it had a sure ally in Merodach-Baladan, the king of Babylon. He was a persistent challenge to Assyrian hegemony in Mesopotamia. The Arabian tribes and Edom allied with Babylon, and Hezekiah's administration, headed by Shebna, seemed to have joined this alliance. Chapter 21 verse 2 records Isaiah's prophetic vision of the undoing of this alliance as Assyria, with a multiethnic military including Elam and Media, sweeps across Babylonia, like whirlwinds in the desert, unseating Merodach-Baladan, and pressing on through Edom and Arabia. The visionary watchman of verse 8 complains that he had kept watch continually by day, and whole nights, which probably reflects the seeming delay in this threatened judgment on Judah's alliance with Babylon. As so often happens, this prolonged waiting bred contempt for God's Word. As Peter discerned of the scoffers in his own day, they counted God's patience as slackness. We church-going folks may not be so brazen as to openly scoff saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:4). Yet, we are in danger of cozying up to the world because we don't meet with any immediate opprobrium. Our worldliness seems to be getting us what we desire, so we are lulled into sleep. Thus our alliance with the world and adoption of the world's ways is encouraged.

Of course, eventually the watchman receives the news, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground” (v. 9). When the people of Seir look for some glimmer of hope, the watchman reports that morning is coming, but it is instantly swallowed by the night. They have no dawn, because they have rejected the Word of the Lord for the ways of the world.

Not only did Jerusalem rest secure in their military alliances, but they looked to their own arsenals and fortifications as their defense, rather than looking to the LORD. 22:8 says, “In that day you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest.” God is not against such preparations. The telling words, however, are “you looked to,” because we learn below that “you did not look to Him” (v. 11). This “looking to” indicates trust. So we see that their trust was not in the Lord, but ultimately in their own strength. They filled in the breaches, ensured their water supply, and gathered their weapons. But they did not look to God.

The Christian who is walking humbly with the Lord, knows his weakness and turns to the Lord in prayer. The humble Christian knows his limits, and looks to the Word of God for counsel. We must be on guard against that godless mindset that goes through the day without a thought toward God. We must beware of that attitude that is so cock-sure that we never pause to consider what God says about a decision. I’m not talking about waiting around for a voice to whisper in your ear. I’m talking about taking your choices to the Word of God, the Bible, by patiently weighing options in the light of what you read in Scripture, by seeking biblical counsel from Christian friends. I’m talking about praying, and asking God to give you wisdom from His Word by His Spirit. Beware of the blinding effect of self-confidence.

Second, **beware of the blinding effect of self-indulgence.** On the eve of the overthrow of the Babylonian resistance, the people of Jerusalem are portrayed as nonchalantly going about their daily routines, not making any preparations for repercussions heading their way. 21:5 says, “They prepare the table, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink. Arise, O princes oil the shield.” Here they are, carrying on with life as usual, as their ally is pummeled into the ground. Interpreters differ over how the statement to oil the shield fits in the context. Some see it as a call to arms, awakening them from their indifference. However, oiling the shields is not the same as “take up your shields.” Oiling the shields is routine maintenance, that probably reflects the same complacent attitude represented in their spreading a table for a feast, while the enemy closes in. Once Assyria finishes putting down the more proximate threat of Babylon, they will be coming for Judah next. But the people don’t seem to care. Isaiah says that when the Lord Yahweh called for repentance, they chose to party instead, even after Assyria had breached the Judean defenses to the north of Jerusalem and were just about to knock on the city gates. We read, “In that day the Lord GOD of hosts called for weeping and mourning, for baldness and wearing sackcloth; and behold, joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” (22:12-13). This apathy toward God was the sign of their apostasy, so this sin will not be atoned for them (22:14). They had intoxicated themselves on earthly pleasures, so they were imperceptive of the danger they were in. The feasting is just one example of the creature comforts that they enjoyed to the point of impairing their judgment and dulling their moral faculties. We all know the old adage that a drunk is “drowning his sorrows.” Well, there are multiple ways to drown our sorrows and put our sins out

of mind without a bottle. You can muffle the prophetic word through otherwise legitimate activities. You can stick your head in the sand, so to speak, with workaholism just as easily as you can with alcoholism. You can even “focus on the family” to the exclusion of your duty to God. You can busily “love your neighbor,” as a distraction to avoid the fact that you don’t enjoy loving God. It isn’t just those obviously sinful behaviors that keep us in a spiritual slumber. Believe me, if I am not on my guard, polishing my sermon manuscript can be a means of keeping me too busy to hear God’s Word.

The world specializes in mind-numbing distractions. Some of them are inherently sinful, like strip-clubs. Some of them are legit, but we make them sinful by making them our chief end. Beloved, nothing is to be your chief end for even five minutes, except God. What are the things that suck up your attention to take your mind off of God? Are you a social media junkie? Are you a political addict? Are you a relationship burnout, using relationships to keep you from pursuing the most important relationship of all? You don’t need dope to be a dope. There are lots of “fixes” to keep you in a fog. Looking to the world, looking to yourself, looking to the idols of your heart, will keep you from hearing God’s Word and knowing true life. So, beware of the blinding effects of self-confidence and self-indulgence.

**Finally, look to the LORD for true life.** 22:11 tells us that this is where Judah ultimately failed. “But you did not look to Him who did it, or see Him who planned it long ago.” Unrestrained self-indulgence is the lifestyle of those who have no tomorrow to look forward to. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” (22:13). Paul quotes this saying in 1 Corinthians 15. In that chapter, Paul is expounding on our hope of resurrection from the dead. He is refuting those who deny the hope that

we will actually rise from the dead to live forever with the Lord. Craig Blomberg summarizes Paul's argument: "The main point of verses 12-19 is that if there is no coming bodily resurrection of all Christians, then Jesus Himself was not bodily raised, and that makes Christianity futile. Paul continuously repeats this thought from several different angles in these verses. The upshot is that all of the following result if there is no bodily resurrection: both the apostolic preaching and the Corinthians' faith are useless (v. 14); Paul and his companions are liars (v. 15), all of humanity stands condemned because of their sins (v. 17); and those who have already died, including believers, are eternally lost (v. 18). As a result, Christians are most deserving of others' pity or compassion, since they have given up creaturely comforts and endured persecution (vv. 30-32) for the sake of an empty promise (v. 19)." Paul says that if we have no hope of the resurrection, then we might as well live according to this philosophy: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). Paul knows that Christians will constantly face the challenge to believe that Christ truly is alive, that Christ is really with us, and that Christ will in fact raise our bodies to immortal life with Him. So, he gives counsel that today's Christian foolishly believes that we are too mature to need. He gives counsel that we work hard to refute, ingeniously pointing to the example of Jesus to establish our case. He says, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals'" (v. 33). Immediately, the super spiritual Christian of the grown up church, of whom Paul has not attained, points out that Jesus had the reputation of "hanging out with sinners," even thieves and prostitutes. However, I think you will note that Jesus did not merely "hang out" with people. Jesus came to save us from our sins. Every thief and prostitute and religious hypocrite knew, or quickly learned, that Jesus came into *their* life to lead them *into His* life. There was no mistaking that. It is probably safe to say that Jesus did not

have a mere casual relationship with any human being; and it certainly doesn't follow that because Jesus came to save sinners, therefore it doesn't matter who I hang out with. Paul warns against keeping company with those who do not believe in the risen Christ. He warns of the corrupting influence from those who do not live in the hope of Jesus' coming and the promise of our resurrection. Certainly, we want to take the good news to those without this hope. But, if you are passive in such relationships, you are opening yourself to a worldly mindset that would not have you living before the face of God and in the light of His promise in Christ.

The problem with this philosophy is not in "eating and drinking." God is not condemning joy and gladness, feasting and making merry. God does not condemn sinful self-confidence because timidity is a virtue. Paul told Timothy to "fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a Spirit not of timidity but of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim. 1:6-7). God does not condemn self-indulgence because asceticism is a virtue. Paul warns of "the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:2-5). He counsels the Colossians, "Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink. . . . Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism" (Col. 2:16, 18). God is not a killjoy. The problem with this philosophy is that it seeks joy and gladness *in* eating flesh and drinking wine. It seeks joy and gladness *in* eating and drinking, rather than in God. It promotes over-indulgence today, because there is no promise for tomorrow. It is as C.S. Lewis in-



sightfully remarked, “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”<sup>1</sup>

God is not a joyless King who is frustrated by His ineffectual reign so that He wants everyone to have to share in His misery. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit exult in each other, and delight in the glory of their Triune being. There is eternal love and overflowing gladness existing between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is to this love and joy and delight that God calls us. It was for this that Jesus prayed for us on His way to the cross: *“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory that You have given Me because You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them”* (John 17:20-26).

Have you ever seen a dog that ran away from its master? Maybe it still has on a collar. It looks malnourished, with its ribs sticking out and stomach gaunt, its fur prickly and patchy.

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<sup>1</sup> *Weight of Glory and other Addresses.*

It looks like it is starving, but not because it hasn't eaten. If you could have followed it around for the day you would have seen it eating constantly, digging under this bush, sticking its head inside that trash can, licking up who knows what off of the sidewalk. All day long, the dog seemed to be eating, but it never seemed satisfied, and it is certainly undernourished, because it has been eating garbage and scat and has contracted parasites that suck what little nutrition its scrounging could afford. That is what God sees when He looks on our godless merrymaking. This is what Christ knows we will be apart from Him. Our souls are not satisfied apart from the Master. The Holy Spirit spoke to this through Solomon: "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief" (Prov. 14:13). This is why James, echoing Isaiah counsels, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you" (James 4:8-9). What James means is to let your worldly laughter be turned to godly mourning, and let your godless joy be turned to godly gloom. Be broken over your sin and divided loyalty, so that you may find wholeness and health in Christ. He doesn't say, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, so that He can strike you down!" He says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you." If you try to find life apart from Him, you will find death. But if you find your life in Him, then you will be exalted. God's call to weep and mourn is not as an end in itself. It is to the end of finding true joy and gladness, free from sin and resting in Him.

Let us learn to say with David in Psalm 16, "I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad,

and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let Your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (7-11).

Isaiah said with anguish in his soul, deep sorrow in his heart, and tears flooding his eyes, “You looked to the world, you looked to yourself, you looked to the pleasures of this life, but you did not look to Him who did it, or see Him who planned it long ago; you did not look to the LORD.” Beware of the blinding effect of self-confidence. Beware of the blinding effect of self-indulgence. And look to the Lord for true life. The world’s party is a masquerade. Underneath all those brightly painted masks and affected smiles are the pangs of death in the soul, the sadness of sin-wearied lives. Jesus still calls, “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

**Let us pray:**

O Sovereign LORD, how blessed You are for giving us this Word. We thank You for these gracious warnings, and for the blessed hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. We seek Your face, knowing that if we were left to ourselves we would stubbornly refuse the gladness and joy You afford to pursue the vain pleasures of this world without You. Cause us, O Lord, to look away from ourselves and the idols that would draw us from You; cause us to look to You, the living God and our life. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.