

Over the last few weeks

we have been looking at the oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah 13-23.

There are ten oracles in two groups of five.

We have looked at the oracles concerning Israel’s neighbors:

Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Egypt.

Babylon alone will be able to defeat Assyria,

but they themselves will be destroyed by the hand of the LORD,  
swept away with the broom of destruction.

We concluded last time on a note of hope.

Egypt and Assyria will gather together to worship God with Israel.

Tonight, however, we get a darker picture.

Isaiah does not have a progressive view of history.

There is no steady march of progress in Isaiah’s view.

While Isaiah has a very rosy picture of where things are going –

he also has a very realistic picture of how bad things are –

and how they are likely going to remain this way for a while yet...

Tonight we turn to the final five oracles – though we’ll only get through the first three:

concerning the wilderness of the sea

concerning Dumah

concerning Arabia

concerning the valley of vision

and concerning Tyre.

The titles of these oracles are cryptic.

There are clear references to help us understand the historical situation,

but the cryptic titles point us beyond the historical situation

to the principles of divine justice.

And as we walk through the oracles concerning the nations,

we keep seeing the centrality of Zion over and over.

As we saw last week:

“In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria,  
a blessing in the midst of the earth.”

Israel will be a blessing in the midst of the earth –

the place where God’s blessing goes forth to the superpowers of the age.

In other words, Zion is taking center stage here in the midst of the nations.

## 1. The Oracle Concerning the Wilderness of the Sea (v1-10)

### a. The Whirlwind from the Wilderness (v1)

*The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea.*

*As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on,  
it comes from the wilderness,  
from a terrible land.*

The oracle “concerning the wilderness of the sea” is a reference to Babylon.

Babylon is, after all, a desert land beside the Persian Gulf.

But there is a double meaning here.

The sea is often used as an image of the power of the nations,  
and Babylon is a powerful nation.

Between 722-702 Merodach-Baladan secured the independence of Babylon  
from the Assyrian empire (during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah).

In chapter 39 we will hear about Merodach-Baladan’s attempts to bring Judah  
into an anti-Assyrian coalition.

But Babylon, the wilderness by the sea, is compared to another wilderness by the sea:  
the Negeb.

The Negeb was the mountainous desert to the south of Jerusalem.

It is a dry and parched land with little use for man or beast.

So Isaiah declares “As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on, it comes from the wilderness,  
from a terrible land.”

A message is coming from Babylon—

and even as Merodach-Baladan’s messengers come to the king,  
a stern vision is told to Isaiah:

### b. The Horror of the Stern Vision (v2-5)

<sup>2</sup> *A stern vision is told to me;  
the traitor betrays,  
and the destroyer destroys.*

Babylon has betrayed Assyria —

but Babylon cannot be trusted —

after all, it is the nature of traitors to betray.

It is the nature of destroyers to destroy.

If you put your trust in a prince who betrays his king,  
then you are trusting traitors!

This has always been a problem in human history.

How you act in one area of your life cannot be sequestered from the rest!

Oh, you can put on a show!

You can pretend!  
But you cannot escape.

You are what you love.  
You become what you worship.  
Whatever it is that you desire will more and more be revealed in you.

The traitor betrays.  
The destroyer destroys.

You can expect that people will be what they are.

And God will judge accordingly –  
so that each one will receive according to what he has done.

And so God says:

*Go up, O Elam;  
lay siege, O Media;  
all the sighing she has caused  
I bring to an end.*

Elam and Media will be the instruments of God in returning upon Babylon  
“all the sighing she has caused.”

That’s good, right?  
Shouldn’t we be glad to see judgment coming against treacherous nations?

And yet, that is *not* Isaiah’s response:

<sup>3</sup> *Therefore my loins are filled with anguish;  
pangs have seized me,  
like the pangs of a woman in labor;  
I am bowed down so that I cannot hear;  
I am dismayed so that I cannot see.*  
<sup>4</sup> *My heart staggers; horror has appalled me;  
the twilight I longed for  
has been turned for me into trembling.*

Why does Isaiah say this?

Well, he is referring back to the first oracle in chapter 13.  
Look at the Oracle Concerning Babylon –  
chapter 13, verses 6-8:

<sup>6</sup> *Wail, for the day of the LORD is near;  
as destruction from the Almighty<sup>[e]</sup> it will come!*  
<sup>7</sup> *Therefore all hands will be feeble,  
and every human heart will melt.*  
<sup>8</sup> *They will be dismayed:  
pangs and agony will seize them;  
they will be in anguish like a woman in labor.  
They will look aghast at one another;  
their faces will be aflame.*

There – in chapter 13 – Isaiah had called for *them* to be dismayed –  
*they* would be in anguish like a woman in labor.

But now *I* am in anguish.  
Now the prophet feel in his own body the pangs of labor.

Some have said that Isaiah is simply feeling the burden of the wrath of God against the nations.

And that's true.  
But *how* is he feeling it?  
And *why* is he feeling it?

Because this is the oracle *concerning the wilderness of the sea*.  
The whirlwind in the Negeb sweep on –  
it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land.  
Where does it come to?  
Jerusalem.

The traitor betrays – the destroyer destroys...

Sure, Babylon is the traitor – but why is God saying this to Isaiah?  
Because Jerusalem is complicit in Babylon's treachery!  
And if traitors betray – and if betrayal begets betrayal –  
then where is this story going?

This story ends with Judas.

This story ends with Jerusalem betraying her King – her Messiah – her God.

<sup>5</sup> *They prepare the table,  
they spread the rugs,<sup>[a]</sup>  
they eat, they drink.  
Arise, O princes;*

*oil the shield!*

Though he longed for the twilight of the Assyrian Empire,  
though he longed for the end of Babylon –  
yet he is horrified to see Hezekiah joining the alliance. (21:5)  
The celebration of the princes is the cause of Isaiah's mourning.

Jerusalem is joining a lost cause.

In other words, Jerusalem is becoming Babylon.

It's a familiar – if tragic – story.

The book of Judges was a story of Israel becoming like the Canaanites.  
The oracles of Isaiah show how Jerusalem is becoming Babylon.

This is why Isaiah laments!

After the death of Jesus, his disciples wept:

We had hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel!  
No doubt many had hoped that Hezekiah would be the Immanuel –  
*God with us* –  
the prince of peace!

No one ever rejoices at the thought of the cross!

As Isaiah begins to see the patterns and purposes of God,  
“My heart staggers; horror has appalled me;  
the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling.”

And so the Lord tells Isaiah:

**c. The Watchman's Call (v6-9a)**

<sup>6</sup> *For thus the Lord said to me:*

*“Go, set a watchman;  
let him announce what he sees.*

<sup>7</sup> *When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs,  
riders on donkeys, riders on camels,  
let him listen diligently,  
very diligently.”*

And so Isaiah sets up a watchman to see what may come.

The watchman is often used as a picture of the prophet.

The watchman would stand at the highest point on the wall –  
looking out – watching for any sign of trouble.

The prophets were watchmen who were called  
to warn the people of God of coming trouble.

<sup>8</sup> *Then he who saw cried out:<sup>[b]</sup>  
“Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord,  
continually by day,  
and at my post I am stationed  
whole nights.  
<sup>9</sup> And behold, here come riders,  
horsemen in pairs!”*

The image in verse 8 is that of a watchman who waits for a long time.  
Imagine what it is like to be a watchman.  
It can get pretty boring.

You are standing there all day – or all night –  
and it might be months – or even years –  
before you see something worth reporting!  
(something worth waking up your boss for!).

But then the watchman sees “here come riders, horsemen in pairs!”

#### **d. The Fall of Babylon (v9b-10)**

*And he answered,*

Who is this speaking?  
Almost certainly not the watchman.  
Rather, this is the messenger – the horsemen in pairs –  
reporting the message:

*“Fallen, fallen is Babylon;  
and all the carved images of her gods  
he has shattered to the ground.”*

Babylon the betrayer will not stand.  
Her idolatry will result in her ruin.  
When you worship that which is not God,  
then you invariably live your life out of whack with the universe.

Because God made the universe!  
He made us for himself –  
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him!

Babylon will not stand.  
Babylon will fall.

Isaiah has already told us that Babylon will destroy Assyria (ch. 13-14)  
But Babylon is not a stable ally.  
Like Egypt and Cush, Babylon too will fall.  
Revelation 14 and 18 will echo this cry: Fallen, fallen is Babylon.  
But of course, by the first century A.D., Babylon was a two-bit town.  
Revelation sees “Babylon” as the manifestation of earthly power  
wielded in opposition to the kingdom of Christ.

But Isaiah was the first to use it in such a fashion.  
The watchman watches throughout the night,  
and in the watches of the night, horsemen come in pairs  
declaring the fall of Babylon and her gods.

John reflects on this in 1 John 2:15-17

*<sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life<sup>[c]</sup>—is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*

What is it that you *love*?

What is it that you have set your heart upon?

All that is in the world – the desires of the flesh – (our bodily desires)  
and the desires of the eyes – (our imagination/curiosity)  
and the pride of life – (our stuff and our status)  
these things are not from the Father – but from the world.

At first that may sound strange –  
didn't God make the world?  
Aren't these things good?

Yes, God made the world.  
But that doesn't mean that our desires are therefore good.

Our desires have been corrupted by sin.  
That's why John says *Do not love the world or the things of the world.*

Do you hear how strongly he says it?  
*If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.  
For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh, and the desires of the eyes,  
and the pride of life – is not from the Father but is from the world.*

John recognized what Isaiah was saying here:

when Jerusalem becomes Babylon –  
when we pursue our desires instead of pursuing God –  
then we destroy ourselves.

That's why Jesus says "*Do not be anxious, saying 'what shall we eat?'  
or 'what shall we drink?' or 'what shall we wear?'*  
*For the Gentiles seek after all these things,  
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.  
But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be added to you.*" (Matthew 6:31-33)

When we try to seek the kingdom of God *and our own kingdoms* –  
the result is invariably that we transform Jerusalem into Babylon.  
When we try to love God *and love the world and the things in the world* –  
the result is that we don't really love God.

As evidence, I would present the book of Numbers, the book of Judges, the book of Kings –  
and the book of my life.

When I pursue my desires, I don't pursue God.  
Psalm 37:3-4 says:

*Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.  
Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

Because if you are trusting in the LORD – if you are delighting in the LORD –  
if you are loving God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength,  
then he will give you what you desire –  
because your desires will be rightly oriented toward him!

Here in Isaiah 21,  
Isaiah is describing what happens when we *don't* do this.

And Isaiah weeps – because he sees that Jerusalem has put her trust in Babylon –  
and therefore Babylon's fate will become Jerusalem's as well:

<sup>10</sup> *O my threshed and winnowed one,  
what I have heard from the LORD of hosts,  
the God of Israel, I announce to you.*

Jerusalem is the "threshed and winnowed one" –  
beaten up – beaten down – threshed and winnowed –  
feeling as though there is no future...

And so we come to the sixth oracle – the oracle concerning Dumah.

## 2. The Oracle Concerning Dumah (v11-12)

### What Time Is It? Not Yet!

<sup>11</sup> *The oracle concerning Dumah.*

*One is calling to me from Seir,*

*“Watchman, what time of the night?*

*Watchman, what time of the night?”*

<sup>12</sup> *The watchman says:*

*“Morning comes, and also the night.*

*If you will inquire, inquire;*

*come back again.”*

The oracle concerning Dumah consists of only two verses.

Dumah was one of the sons of Ishmael. (Gen 25:4)

Isaiah connects Dumah with Edom (the location of Seir).

And so here an Edomite calls out to the watchman,

“Watchman, what time of the night?”

“Watchman, how much longer?”

And the watchman replies, “morning comes and also the night.

If you will inquire, inquire. Come back again.”

Israel’s brothers are asking,

how much longer must we endure through this Assyrian night

and they come to the watchman of Zion to inquire.

But Isaiah has no good news for them.

Come back later.

The hour has not yet come.

Yes, Isaiah brings a message of hope,

but that hope may be long in coming.

The people of God must often endure through many trials before coming to glory.

Why do we think that the whole universe revolves around me?

Well, obviously, because I only have access to my own thoughts – my own experiences.

But this is why is why we need community.

We need to be reminded that *my story* is always interconnected

with thousands of other stories –

and I only ever catch the tiniest of glimpses into the meaning of those stories!

### 3. The Oracle Concerning Arabia (v13-17) Those Who Trusted in Babylon Will Come to an End

The oracle concerning Arabia concludes chapter 21.

The nomadic Dedanites lived far to the south,  
and the tribe of Kedar was the northernmost of the Arabian tribes.

They too had fallen under the sway of Assyria.

In 703 the Arabs joined with Merodach-Baladan of Babylon,  
but they were overthrown by Sennacherib of Assyria.

Babylon became independent, but Assyria was still too strong in the west.

<sup>13</sup> *The oracle concerning Arabia.*

*In the thickets in Arabia you will lodge,*

*O caravans of Dedanites.*

<sup>14</sup> *To the thirsty bring water;*

*meet the fugitive with bread,*

*O inhabitants of the land of Tema.*

<sup>15</sup> *For they have fled from the swords,*

*from the drawn sword,*

*from the bent bow,*

*and from the press of battle.*

<sup>16</sup> *For thus the Lord said to me, "Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end. <sup>17</sup> And the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken."*

The lesson is simple.

The nations cannot stand against the power of Assyria.

But that is not because of Assyrian strength.

It is because Yahweh, the God of Israel, has spoken.

When the God of Israel speaks, the fates of the nations are sealed.

As we go through these oracles, we are seeing how futile it is  
to put your hope in the city of man.

We have here no lasting city.

This is why it is important for Christians to remember that our citizenship is in heaven.  
Zion is our true home.

What does this mean for us?

Well, think of how Paul uses his Roman citizenship.

But throughout his Christian life, Paul always used his Roman citizenship

for the sake of advancing the kingdom of Christ.  
He endured many beatings that he could have avoided if he had insisted on his rights.  
But when he saw that his Roman citizenship could be invoked for the benefit of Zion –  
then he spoke up and claimed his rights.

So, for instance, when you are voting,  
don't just think about how to advance your political interests and concerns.

Think rather about how your vote will advance the kingdom of Christ.  
The politicians of this age will always stress and worry  
about what will happen in the next four years.  
Those who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness  
will keep a longer-term perspective in view!

The Christian politician will never be concerned for how to acquire or maintain political power.  
Rather, the Christian politician will be concerned for how to love God and neighbor.  
If that gets me elected, thanks be to God!  
If that gets me the boot, thanks be to God!