

PROCLAMATIONS AGAINST BABYLON, EDOM, AND ARABIA

Isaiah Chapter 21

How often do you hear skeptics saying, “If there really is a God, why doesn’t He do something about all the injustice in the world? Why doesn’t He stop the abuse of children and the poverty?” Well, as we look at scripture, including today’s passage in Isaiah, we find that He has done something in the past and that He will again intervene to bring justice to the earth when the time is right.

We’ve been going through the book of Isaiah, which gives us a marvelous picture of who God is and how He deals with people. Today we come to chapter 21, which consists of three **oracles (burdens or prophecies)** grouped together. The common thread among the three countries dealt with is that each country mentioned became an enemy of Israel and Judah. Verses 1-10 relate to **Babylon**, and here Isaiah is looking far into the future, for in his lifetime Babylon could scarcely have been recognized as even a potential enemy to the people of God either in Israel or Judah. But God had already made it clear to Isaiah that Babylon would be the main enemy they had to fear. **In this vision, God shows Isaiah the horrible fate Babylon will eventually suffer.**

Isaiah 21:1-17:

*1 THIS MESSAGE CAME TO ME CONCERNING THE LAND OF **BABYLONIA**:*

Disaster is roaring down on you from the desert, like a whirlwind sweeping in from the Negev.

*2 I see an awesome vision: I see you plundered and destroyed. Go ahead, you Elamites and Medes, take part in the siege. **Babylon will fall**, and the groaning of all the nations she enslaved will end.*

3 My stomach aches and burns with pain. Sharp pangs of horror are upon me, like the pangs of a woman giving birth. I grow faint when I hear what God is planning; I am blinded with dismay.

4 My mind reels; my heart races. The sleep I once enjoyed at night is now a faint memory. I lie awake, trembling.

5 Look! They are preparing a great feast. They are spreading rugs for people to sit on. Everyone is eating and drinking. Quick! Grab your shields and prepare for battle! You are being attacked!

6 Meanwhile, the Lord said to me, “Put a watchman on the city wall to shout out what he sees.

7 Tell him to sound the alert when he sees chariots drawn by horses and warriors mounted on donkeys and camels.”

8 Then the watchman called out, “Day after day I have stood on the watchtower, my lord. Night after night I have remained at my post.

*9 Now at last—look! Here come the chariots and warriors!” Then the watchman said, “**BABYLON IS FALLEN!** All the idols of Babylon lie broken on the ground!”*

10 O my people, threshed and winnowed, I have told you everything the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, has said.

11 This message came to me concerning **EDOM**: Someone from Edom keeps calling to me, “Watchman, how much longer until morning? When will the night be over?”

12 The watchman replies, “Morning is coming, but night will soon follow. If you wish to ask again, then come back and ask.”

13 This message came to me concerning **ARABIA**: O caravans from Dedan, hide in the deserts of Arabia.

14 O people of Tema, bring food and water to these weary refugees.

15 They have fled from drawn swords and sharp arrows and the terrors of war.

16 “But within a year,” says the Lord, “**all the glory of Kedar will come to an end.**”

17 Only a few of its courageous archers will survive. **I, the Lord, the God of Israel, have spoken!**”

We had one oracle of **BABYLON** earlier in Isaiah 13. Here in chapter 21 we have another oracle of Babylon’s fall. However, the emphasis in chapter 13 was more on the end times when the final world power, also referred to as Babylon, will be destroyed when Christ returns to set up His millennial kingdom headquartered in Jerusalem. Here in chapter 21 the focus is on the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians around 538 B.C. when the people of Judah were being held captive in Babylon. It was the defeat of the Babylonians by the Medes and the Persians that made possible the release of the people of Judah so that they could return home.

God wanted Judah to be aware that the nation of Babylon would not last, but would be conquered after they took Judah captive and would then be destroyed forever in the end times when Christ returned. Babylon is marked for ruin; and all that believe God’s prophets can believe it will happen even when they see Babylon basking in power and glory. Babylon is here called the *desert or plain of the sea*; for it was a flat country, and full of lakes like little seas, and was abundantly watered with the many streams of the river Euphrates. Babylon at the time of the writing of this prophecy was not the world power, Assyria was. But in a short time Babylon would emerge as the world power. Babylon reached the peak of its strength in **Nebuchadnezzar’s** time.

God foretold Babylon’s fall again and again through various prophecies so that his people might not be terrified at their fate when they were prisoners in Babylon.¹ God wanted to give his people hope to hang onto when they were going through great misery.

Isaiah 21:1,2:

1 **THE ORACLE CONCERNING THE WILDERNESS OF THE SEA.** As windstorms in the Negev sweep on, It comes from the wilderness, from a terrifying land.

2 A harsh vision has been shown to me; The treacherous one still deals

¹ Ironside, H.A., *Isaiah*. P.119.

*treacherously, and the destroyer still destroys. Go up, **Elam (Persia)**², lay siege, **Media**; I have made an end of all the groaning she has caused.*

The **MEDES AND PERSIANS** will come *from the desert, from a terrible land*. They will descend swiftly and powerfully on Babylon. *Elam* (that is, Persia) is summoned to go up against Babylon, and, in conjunction with the forces of Media, to besiege it. These forces come as whirlwinds so suddenly, so strongly, so terribly, making a mighty noise, and mowing down everything that stands in their way. As is usual in such a case, some deserters will go over to the stronger forces: *“The treacherous one still deals treacherously.”* Historians tell us of **Gadatas** and **Gobryas**, two great officers of the king of Babylon that deserted over to Cyrus, the Mede, and, being well acquainted with every nook and cranny in the city, led a force of soldiers directly to the palace, where **Belshazzar**, the king of Babylon, was slain³

Isaiah 21:3,4:

3 For this reason my loins are full of anguish; Pains have seized me like the pains of a woman in labor. I am so bewildered I cannot hear, so terrified I cannot see.

*4 My mind reels, horror overwhelms me; **THE TWILIGHT I LONGED FOR HAS BEEN TURNED FOR ME INTO TREMBLING.***

To the proud and arrogant Babylonians this would be a *harsh vision*, particularly to the king of Babylon. It seems that it is he who is sadly lamenting his inevitable fate, which was literally fulfilled in Belshazzar. The very night in which his city was taken and he was murdered, King Belshazzar had seen the handwriting on the wall.

Isaiah 21:5-7:

5 They set the table, they spread out the cloth, they eat, they drink; “Rise up, captains, oil the shields,”

6 For thus the Lord says to me, “Go, station the lookout, let him report what he sees.

7 “When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, A train of donkeys, a train of camels, Let him pay close attention, very close attention.”

Verses 5 and describe what will be going on in the city of Babylon even as the enemy camps outside their gates. The king, Belshazzar, will be hosting a banquet. The king orders the guards to keep watch in the watchtowers while the guests eat and drink securely and make merry; and, if any alarm should be given, they would arise and put on their shields and be ready to give the enemy a warm reception.

Verse 7 is a sounding of the alarm by the guards at the approach of the forces of Cyrus and Darius. The Lord, in this vision to Isaiah showed the prophet the watchman set in his watch-tower near the palace. This watchman here saw horsemen approaching and riding

² Parentheses added.

³ Henry, M. 1996, c1991. Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume . Hendrickson: Peabody

in a long line two abreast. He then saw other riders on donkeys, which were much in use among the Persians, and other riders on camels, which were likewise much in use among the Medes. The donkeys and camels signify the two nations combined against Babylon. The watchman, seeing these riders at some distance, paid very close attention to them.

Isaiah 21:8, 9

8 Then the lookout called, "O Lord, I stand continually by day on the watchtower, And I am stationed every night at my guard post.

*9 "Now behold, here comes a troop of riders, horsemen in pairs." And one said, "**Fallen, fallen is Babylon**"; And all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground."*

The lookout who stands in his watchtower and usually sees nothing, suddenly reports that enemy troops have entered the city. Then one of the horsemen calls out that Babylon is fallen and all her false gods have been shattered to the ground. Babylon was the mother of harlots (that is, of idolatry), which was a major factor in her destruction.

Remember all of that was prophesied, or foretold, to Isaiah over 200 years before it actually happened. Let's get a more complete description of what actually happened on that fateful night as reported in the book of Daniel.

Daniel 5:1-6, NAS:

1 Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand.

2 When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.

3 Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which was in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them.

4 They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

5 Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing.

6 Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

And yet that was but the beginning of Belshazzar's fears. When Belshazzar called for someone to interpret the writing, Daniel, the servant of God, was the only one who could. Daniel's interpretation of the writing could not but increase Belshazzar's terror. Now let's skip down to find out what Daniel's interpretation of the handwriting was.

Daniel 5:25-28,30,31:

25 “Now this is the inscription that was written out: ‘**MENÇ, MENÇ, TEKÇL, UPHARSIN.**’

26 “This is the interpretation of the message: ‘MENÇ’—God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it.

27 “ ‘TEKÇL’—you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient.

28 “ ‘UPHARSIN’—your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.”

30 That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain.

31 So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

Belshazzar was slain on that night when he was in the height of his drunken orgy, with his concubines about him and a thousand of his lords celebrating with him. He had desired and planned a night of pleasure, promising himself undisturbed, exquisite enjoyment of the most fantasized gratifications of sensual pleasure. He seemed to also take delight in a particular defiance of God and religion in the profaning of the temple table settings. This night of sensual pleasure would be a night that was turned into fear and death⁴

Isaiah 21:10:

10 O my threshed people, and my afflicted of the threshing floor! What I have heard from the Lord of hosts, The God of Israel, I make known to you.

In verse 10 Isaiah tells the people that this is the vision he was given from God. The title by which Isaiah addressed the people is from God: “O my threshed people, and my afflicted of the threshing floor!” He speaks these words as from God, and directs his speech to those that were Israelites indeed, **THE FAITHFUL IN THE LAND.**

The church is God’s threshing floor today and it contains the most valuable products of this earth, the redeemed of the Lord. They are, in a manner of speaking, gathered together and stored. **True believers are the wheat of God’s threshing floor.** Hypocrites are the chaff and straw, which take up a great deal of room but are of small value. The wheat and chaff are now mixed together but will be finally and forever separated.

Isaiah gives them assurance of the truth that God had given to him, upon which they might build their hopes. “*What I have heard from the Lord of hosts, The God of Israel,” that, and nothing else, “I make known to you.*”

In all events concerning the church, past present, and future, we must see God both as the Lord of hosts, that is, as the Commander of angel armies, and as the God of Israel. Israel’s God is the One who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6, 7). In other words, God is the One who has power enough to do anything for his Church and grace enough to do everything that is for

⁴ Henry, M. 1996, c1991. Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume . Hendrickson: Peabody

her good. And the words of his prophets are to be considered as words received from the Lord. These prophets are not to hold back anything which he has entrusted them to declare, just as they dare not declare anything as from God which he has not made known to them (1 Corinthians 11:23.)⁵

So we see from this prophecy regarding Babylon and the account of what actually happened, that God gave his people hope long before they needed it. He predicted that Babylon would become an enemy and treat Judah with injustice and oppression. But he also told them how Babylon would be punished for that. The people of Judah in captivity could look to God's Word and have hope for their eventual deliverance. There is a scripture verse that says in part, "*before they call, I will answer*" (Isaiah 65:24) and this is certainly an illustration of that. God is the same today as he was then and so he has done that same thing today for those of us who have a personal relationship with him. In the book of Revelation we find that as far as history goes, God will bring true justice about. And right now, in whatever you are facing today, whatever your trial or persecution is, whatever your difficulty this fact is still true. God has a plan that he is working out in your life. He has promised that he can make anything that happens in your life ultimately work for your good (Romans 8:28). Your test right now is to believe in him and trust his timing.

[If length of this message is too much of a problem since this is also Communion Sunday, this could be a logical stopping point and then do the remainder of chap 21 next week, either alone or as part of the next message.—Just a thought.]

Now let's move on to find out what God has to say about the other two enemies of Judah.

Isaiah 21:11, 12:

11 THE ORACLE CONCERNING EDOM. One keeps calling to me from Seir (the name of a mountainous region in Edom)⁶, "Watchman, how far gone is the night? Watchman, how far gone is the night?"

12 The watchman says, "Morning comes but also night. If you would inquire, inquire; Come back again."

Here we have what appears to be an **Edomite** calling to the watchman, who is **Isaiah**. Someone or other called out of **Seir** (a mountainous region of Edom). This someone was more concerned for the public welfare than were the rest of the people, who were generally careless and secure. So Isaiah has a vision of a man from Mt. Seir who wants a prophet to inform and instruct them. Some people who are in a wilderness ask advice of God's prophets and are willing to be taught, while many people in God's Israel ignore him and his prophets. The question the individual has is serious: "*How far gone is the night?*" The petitioner asks the right person, the **watchman**, whose job it is to answer such questions. The petitioner repeats the question to show that he is sincerely interested in getting the right answer.

⁵ Henry, M. 1996, c1991. Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume . Hendrickson: Peabody

⁶ Parentheses added.

God's prophets and ministers are appointed to be watchmen and that is how we are to see them. They are to take notice of the activity of the enemy and make discoveries and then give warning. It is the duty of God's people to inquire of the watchmen, and especially to ask again and again, "*How far gone is the night?*" You see, watchmen are awake when others are asleep and they have a sense of the passage of time.

Now let's look more closely at the text. We need to understand here that *night* stands for calamity and *morning* stands for prosperity. The fact that the question is repeated indicates, in addition to earnestness, anxiety. So when it says, "*morning comes,*" it means that first there will be morning with light, peace, and opportunity. It will be a time of comfort. Afterward, however, will come a night of trouble and calamity. God usually gives a morning of opportunity before he sends a night of calamity, so that his own people may be prepared for the storm while the others are left without excuse. In verse 12 where it says, "*If you would inquire, inquire,*" it means "Ask again of the watchman and come back again and again," suggesting that we have the opportunity to take advantage of the present morning to prepare for the night that is coming. It is an invitation to be inquisitive, be penitent, be willing and obedient. If you are willing, inquire of God and his prophets; otherwise you stand in risk of grave danger. You cannot say that you have not been given the opportunity to know the truth. And we will be held responsible for the opportunities that are given us (Luke 6:47, 48). Those that return again and again and come to know God personally will find they have a great deal of work to do and only a little time to do it in. Therefore they will realize they have a need to be about the Father's business.

Isaiah 21:13-17

*13 **The oracle about Arabia.** In the thickets of Arabia you must spend the night, O caravans of **Dedanites**.*

*14 Bring water for the thirsty, O inhabitants of the land of **Tema**, Meet the fugitive with bread.*

15 For they have fled from the swords, From the drawn sword, and from the bent bow And from the press of battle.

*16 For thus the Lord said to me, "In a year, as a hired man would count it, all the splendor of **Kedar** will terminate;*

*17 and the remainder of the number of bowmen, the mighty men of the sons of **Kedar**, will be few; for **the Lord God of Israel has spoken.**"*

Arabia was a large country, that lay eastward and southward of the land of Canaan. Much of it was possessed by the descendants of Abraham. The Dedanites mentioned in verse 13 were descended from Dedan, Abraham's grandson by Keturah, and the Israelites considered them to be kin. The inhabitants of Tema and Kedar descended from Ishmael, Abraham's eldest son by the concubine, Hagar (Genesis 25:3, 13, 15). The Arabians generally lived in tents, kept cattle, and were a strong people, disciplined to hard work. The Jews probably depended upon them as a sort of a wall or buffer between them and the more warlike eastern nations. **It would therefore be most alarming for the Jews to**

see Arabia falling to foreign powers.

A destroying army will descend on them with *a drawn sword*, with a ready *bent bow*, and with all the *grief of war*. The king of Assyria, probably led campaigns of his fierce and victorious army, capturing parts of Arabia on his way. Since he met with little resistance, he most likely conquered them easily.

The poor country people would be forced to flee for shelter wherever they could find it. *The traveling companies of Dedanites*, which used to travel the main roads with their caravans, were forced to leave them and find shelter in the thickets (a dense growth of shrubbery or small trees) of Arabia. They would also be in danger of dying of thirst for lack of water as they fled from the invading army. The inhabitants of Tema were probably next-door neighbors to the Dedanites and were instructed to provide them with water and bread showing them compassion because they were fleeing from the attack of a powerful army. Tema was a country where water was sometimes a scarce commodity, and we may conclude it would increase the hardship for both the Dedanites and the people of Tema to have to share what were already scarce resources. But their way of life had prepared them for hardships and they knew how to deal with it.

There is a lesson here for us too. We should be prepared to endure hardship ourselves. We can't know all the difficulties we'll face before we die but we know we will face some. Those of us that live in cities may be forced to seek refuge in the country or forests, and in so doing we may know what it means to go hungry instead of having all the food we want. Our mountain isn't so strong that it can't be moved, nor is it so high that it can't be scaled. The Arabians were better able to bear these hardships because in their way of living they had disciplined themselves to hardships. But notice what the scripture calls for the Temanites to do: *Bring water for the thirsty . . . meet the fugitive with bread* (verse 14). Bring water to those that are thirsty, and give bread to those that need it without asking if they need it. This is consistent with admonitions throughout scripture to care for others in practical ways. For instance,

Ecclesiastes 11:1, NIV

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.

Galatians 6:9-10, NAS

9 *And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.*

10 *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.*

We too may get in situations where there's not enough food. Famine is very real on our planet. Unemployment can lead to hunger and lack of food. During the end times we know that famine and lack of food will afflict many people. As Christians we should be willing to share our food with others and to care for the needy. In the period of Tribulation during the end times, it will be even more important for Christians to share what they have with each other, since without the mark of the beast no one will be able to

buy food or necessities.

Coming back to Isaiah 21, we see in verse 16 that all the glory of **Kedar** will soon vanish away. Did they glory in their numerous herds and flocks? They will all be driven away by the enemy. It seems Kedar was also famous for the use of the bow in battle. But their archers, instead of defeating the enemy, will fall themselves and there will be only a few of these mighty men left. Note that, no matter how good they are, neither the skill of archers nor the courage of mighty men can protect a people from the judgments of God when they come. So we see that the glory of wealth and strong armies is the kind of empty glory that can quickly come to nothing.

All this will happen within a short time. Within one year this judgment will come upon Kedar. Even if this span of time is of no great significance to us now, it was undoubtedly of great use to the Arabians then, in order to awaken them to repentance so that like the people of Nineveh they might also prevent the judgment when they knew it was coming.

Isaiah closes by saying in verse 17 this is all going to happen because God says it is going to happen. Such a closing is the way we can all look at the entire Bible. Everything that God tells us is going to happen will happen, and for those who don't believe that, they're going to be in for a big surprise one second after they die. God will right the wrongs. Christ will set up a kingdom that will consist of peace and righteousness and justice.

So we can know that in the final analysis God's justice will prevail. God will right the wrongs, you can count on it.

Psalm 103:6, NKJ

The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed.

Acts 17:31, NIV

For he [God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

The only question is, when God does this will you be included among the righteous? Will you be found to have a personal relationship with him?