

GOD REIGNS

Isaiah 23:8-18

Sometimes we might find ourselves thinking that God is really concerned about our nation and what we are doing, but He pays little or no attention to what is happening halfway around the world in remote places that few of us can even identify. This kind of thinking was certainly the case among most people during the time Isaiah penned his prophecies. The general thinking was that each “territory” had its own god(s) and the farther one was from a territory, the lesser were the influences of that particular god. A clear example of such thinking is seen in the initial part of the account of Jonah who tried to flee from God by going far away from Israel.

A significant portion (eleven chapters) of Isaiah’s prophecy was directed toward other lands or nations that were known to the people of Judah. Many of these nations were oppressive and threatening toward the Jews and one would actually conquer the land of Judah and take many of the Jews 500 miles away. These prophetic oracles against the nations were not for the benefit of these pagan nations but were to reassure the Jews that Jehovah was Lord of all and that He was (and is) in control of everything. The oracles started with Babylon and ended with Tyre which is the account we will be studying from Chapter 23 of Isaiah.

The first part of this chapter is about the pending destruction of Tyre (120 years later) which was a key Phoenician city in the area that is today known as Lebanon. Their ships were active around the coasts of the Mediterranean, where they set up many colonies which were useful to them commercially. Some think they even went beyond the Rock of Gibraltar and explored the Atlantic Ocean areas and even as far away as the Indian Ocean.

Regarding the predicted destruction of Tyre, Isaiah mentioned ships from Spain (Tarshish) that were docked at Cyprus (Kittim), telling their crews to weep and go home because Tyre was no more. Merchants from Spain, the coast lands, and even Egypt would wail because Tyre’s great shipping industry was gone and the Mediterranean economy had been devastated. Similar words were used in reference to Babylon in the later chapters of the Revelation.

The question of why this would happen was addressed by Isaiah and included reasons such as God is just, God is active, and God is to be honored.

God Is Just – 23:8-12

⁸ Who has planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, Whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth? ⁹ The LORD of hosts has planned it, to defile the pride of all beauty, To despise all the honored of the earth. ¹⁰ Overflow your land like the Nile, O daughter of Tarshish, There is no more restraint. ¹¹ He has stretched His hand out over the sea, He has made the kingdoms tremble; The LORD has given a command concerning Canaan to demolish its strongholds. ¹² He has said, “You shall exult no more, O crushed virgin daughter of Sidon. Arise, pass over to Cyprus; even there you will find no rest.” Isaiah 23:8–12 (NASB95)

Tyre was said to have been founded in 2750 BC which would be several hundred years before the Great Flood. (We might conclude that there are some problems in establishing ancient dates.) We see in verse eight that Tyre was a “crowning city” (KJV) or a “bestower of crowns” (NIV). The meaning of this phrase was that this city (with all its commerce) had created a situation in which many of its people lived like kings and princes and they had great influence (honor) in the surrounding areas of that world. They had also established colonies throughout the area that were under their control and enhanced their commerce and trade efforts. Tyre was more influential for a longer period of time and over a far wider area than even Babylon or Assyria. If we were to look for a city of comparable influence in the twentieth or twenty first centuries, we might think of New York City since it is said to be the commerce center of the

world.

(Just as a “curiosity” observation, Tyre occupied an area on the mainland coast plus there was an island not far offshore that it occupied and both areas were referred to as Tyre. Comparing this to New York City, we find a similar situation in that the city spills over into Staten Island and part of Long Island and these are parts of what are named New York City.)

Let’s return to Tyre in the time of Isaiah’s prophecy which was written around 700 BC. The city was destroyed and many of the people fled to escape the carnage of the Babylonians during the time from 585 to 572 BC. In fact, when the thirteen-year siege was over and the Babylonians captured the city most everyone had left by sea and went to the various colonies they controlled. The question on the minds of many people when this was predicted and to be sure would be asked when it did come to pass was “why did this happen and what is the world coming to with all the confusion and chaos?”

We find the answer in verse nine of this divine revelation from God through Isaiah. The first thing we see is that what would happen was part of God’s plan and purpose and it was in response to the world view (attitudes) and resulting actions of those who controlled Tyre. The casual observer would have said that what had happened to Tyre was caused by Assyria (which had restricted Tyre’s trade from 700 to 630 BC) and later on by Babylon and both these were evil nations. However, we see from Isaiah’s words that these nations would be used by God to bring judgment on Tyre for a specific purpose which may make a lot of people (including us) feel uncomfortable.

The revealed reason was that the people of Tyre were prideful. This was one (if not the greatest) commerce centers of the ancient world. Isn’t that something of which to be proud? Isn’t that something to boast about and to get recognition from everyone else with whom they interacted? All of us have probably sung the song “I’m Proud to Be an American.” We would likely all agree that this is the greatest nation on the earth and our accomplishments and our freedoms are something of which we should be proud. So, what IS the problem? Plainly and simply, the problem is PRIDE.

Words such a pride, proud, proudly, conceit, haughtiness, and arrogance are found in more than 115 places in the Bible and these are always mentioned with a negative connotation. Most of us are familiar with Proverbs 16:18 that says “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” but we still speak in terms of being “proud of this or that.” We might go so far as to say that the ultimate oxymoron is the statement “I am proud to be a Christian.” While there are some who use the words “pride” and “proud” in a meaning or sense of arrogance, many Christians may actually mean that they are “glad” or “blessed” and even “humbled” by the fact that we are citizens of our country, or that our children are doing well, and especially that we are part of the family of God. If we were to tell a person from another nation that we are proud to be an American, they would probably think that we were arrogant or conceited about it. So, a word of caution for all of us is that “words have meanings” and those meanings can be misinterpreted by others. Even more important, is that by using the wrong words we might be communicating a wrong message or attitude to ourselves (subconsciously) and our feelings of humility in being greatly bless by God can become a prideful attitude that hinders our spiritual growth.

The consequences of the actions of the Assyrians and the Babylonians would be to deflate the pridefulness of this people who boasted that they had one of the oldest cities in the world, it was a magnificent city (empire), it was strong, secure and inaccessible, it was the leading commercial center of the ancient world, and it was highly respected by others throughout

the area. Consequently, the fall of Tyre would send a strong message to all the world that those who rely on themselves and take credit for their success will discover that they are not self-sufficient and are subject to failure.

The meaning of verse ten is very ambiguous; in addition, it is translated in many different ways in various versions of the Scriptures. The ideas range widely from this being a call for the inhabitants of Tyre to flee by the sea during the time of the siege. Another possibility is that this was a call for those areas that relied on the trade of the Tyre ships that sailed from Carthage (a colony of Tyre) to return to agricultural practices (till the land) since they would need to start growing their own food.

The wide spread influence of the destruction of Tyre would be felt throughout the region and would impact (cause to tremble) other countries who did commerce with Tyre. There was also an observation that even though the people of Tyre escaped to other places like Cyprus there would still be no rest for them since all the things in which they took pride were gone.

God Is Active – 23:13-14

¹³ Behold, the land of the Chaldeans—this is the people which was not; Assyria appointed it for desert creatures—they erected their siege towers, they stripped its palaces, they made it a ruin. ¹⁴ Wail, O ships of Tarshish, For your stronghold is destroyed. Isaiah 23:13–14 (NASB95)

It appears that this prophecy started with the final outcome and then provided an explanation to fill in the details of how it all came about. In verses 8-12 we see the destruction of Tyre and starting in verse thirteen we find the background of all that had led up to the destruction.

A lot of power struggles by the various aggressive nations in that broader area of the world occurred during the 200-year period from 700 to 500 BC. Babylon (the land of Chaldeans) was said to be “the people which was not” which was likely a reference to the fact that Assyria had destroyed the city of Babylon in 689 B.C. However, Babylon was revived and fought to reestablish its dominance. It was this “revived Babylon” that carried out the 13-year siege against Tyre and conquered the area as predicted in Isaiah’s prophecy.

God Is Honored – 23:15-18

¹⁵ Now in that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years like the days of one king. At the end of seventy years it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the harlot: ¹⁶ Take your harp, walk about the city, O forgotten harlot; Pluck the strings skillfully, sing many songs, That you may be remembered. ¹⁷ It will come about at the end of seventy years that the LORD will visit Tyre. Then she will go back to her harlot’s wages and will play the harlot with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth. ¹⁸ Her gain and her harlot’s wages will be set apart to the LORD; it will not be stored up or hoarded, but her gain will become sufficient food and choice attire for those who dwell in the presence of the LORD. Isaiah 23:15–18 (NASB95)

The seventy-year time period referenced in verse 15 could be one of two possibilities. The first option would be during the domination of the region by Assyria and the second option would have been during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the period following the siege and destruction the city of Tyre. We can learn from both of these possibilities and so will examine both.

During the time that Assyria was dominate, they had interfered with the commerce of Tyre for seventy years (700 to 630 B.C.). This seventy-year oppression by the Assyrians was a strong message to the people of Tyre that they were not as great and superior as they imagined themselves to be. We could say that these troubled times were multiple reminders and calls for them to change their ways and abandon their pride. The people of Tyre had dealt with Israel for centuries and were aware of Israel’s God and yet they (in their pride) did not see a need to

abandon their pagan deities or seek to learn more about the God of Israel.

When the Lord provided relief from the Assyrian oppression and things returned to a condition of normalcy, the people of Tyre had not learned the lessons that the troubles were trying to teach them and they returned their old ways.

The judgment of God on this was that whatever she gained during this time of revival of her trade and commerce would not benefit her and her people but would be used to benefit God's people. (It is uncertain how this part of the prophecy would come about.)

If the second time period (after Nebuchadnezzar) was intended, then the assumption that some make is that when Cyrus released the Jews to return from Babylon to their homeland and rebuild that the people of Tyre also returned (from various colonies to which they had fled during the siege) to their city and rebuilt their trade and commerce. We learn from other historical writings regarding the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple that materials were obtained from the area occupied by Tyre. Matthew Henry speculated that some of the people of Tyre had been taken to Babylon along with the Jews and these were closely associated with the Jews during the rebuilding time of both areas and the natural wealth of the region to which Tyre had access did greatly benefit the Jews as they rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple.

The eleven chapters regarding these other nations have important lessons for all of us. The most important is that God is sovereign and He is in control of all the world – even those nations which do not acknowledge Him as God. Next, we learned that God will deal with prideful arrogance. When we trust our wealth and our armies, God will find ways to show us that He alone is our salvation. Following those two lessons, we also see that all nations are accountable to God for their attitudes (pride vs. humility), their actions and the ways they treat other nations.

We are seeing a lot of problems and turmoil as well as natural disasters happening in our nation and these events are wake-up calls for us to realize that “America will be great if America is good. If not, her greatness will vanish away like a morning cloud.” That quotation is from a book published in 1835 by two British pastors who had visited various churches in our country. Perhaps our churches should emphasize the call to make America GOOD again and return to humility and reliance on God so that we can and will enjoy the blessings that accompany a nation whose God is the Lord.