

Our God Saves: Turn

A Warning to Sinful Cities

Isaiah 13-20

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The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. On a bare hill raise a signal; cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude! The sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The LORD of hosts is mustering a host for battle. They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the LORD and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come! Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. 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. Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless (Isa. 13:1–11).

Cut into the ground in Washington D.C. with looming black granite is the Vietnam Memorial. It contains the names of fifty-eight thousand American soldiers who gave their lives in the war. The names are listed in chronological order of their death. I'm sure that many of you have visited the site. Perhaps you have a connection to someone listed.

With the turmoil in Afghanistan this week, I'm sure you saw iconic images connected to the fall of Saigon. And it may have brought back a lot of painful memories. As well, it brings to mind lessons from history that sometimes seem too distant or that we tend to forget.

Memorials are designed to mark the past but also to be sure that we don't forget. Perhaps you know the quote: "He who forgets the past is doomed to repeat it." In this way, memorials really matter. They mark events in history so that we can learn.

This is part of the reason why reading the Old Testament, and especially the Prophets, is really important. We need to bring ourselves into the text and learn the lessons that are there. The apostle Paul put it this way:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and

rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:6-12).

The book of Isaiah fits this purpose. And that’s part of the reason I want you to join us in reading through it this month if you don’t have a reading plan already. It’s important to hear what Isaiah said during his time frame and for us to see what lessons there are to learn.

Last week we talked about the reign of Jesus, and I hope you found ways to apply “He reigns” in your life. Today we are going to cover eight chapters and see how four themes emerge as God speaks to the cities and nations of the world.

What’s the message? In the words of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920): “There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”¹

Isaiah 13-20 contains a series of five oracles. Just leaf through your Bible with me and see the nations and cities he addresses: Babylon (13), Assyria (14), Philistia (14), Moab (15), Damascus (17), Cush (18), and Egypt (19). Throughout these chapters the people of God (Israel and Judah) are also mentioned but not in the same way.

These chapters are a warning: “He reigns.”

Now, these chapters highlight four themes: (1) Sovereignty, (2) Pride, (3) Judgment, and (4) Deliverance. Let me show you how these themes emerge and then draw some conclusions at the end.

1) Sovereignty

The word “sovereignty” means that God’s in charge of everything. It means that God not only orchestrates all of the events of human history but also that there is a plan that God is working out. A great summary of this truth is in Romans 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.”

We see this immediately in 13:1-4. This oracle from Isaiah is an announcement (v. 2) about the command of God (v. 3) connected to the plan of God. The text tells us that God is orchestrating the events of human history and he is using kingdoms and nations for his purposes.

As we’ll see later, God is using them for discipline and judgment. Notice that God is described as “the Lord of Hosts” (v. 4). This would be similar to how we would use the word “commander-in-chief.” And if you look ahead to verse 5, you’ll see that these nations are the weapons of God’s indignation.

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/99035-there-is-not-a-square-inch-in-the-whole-domain>

It's interesting that Isaiah starts with Babylon since most of our attention has been on Assyria. Eventually, Babylon would become the great superpower, and it would be the nation that dealt the final blow to Judah. But Babylon is not only a nation; it also represents the rebellious, fallen, and proud world. Revelation 18:1 says, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!"

When John wrote the book of Revelation, Babylon wasn't even a nation! Yet John used it because of what Babylon as a nation and as a society represented. Babylon is representative of the forces of evil on the earth.² And isn't it interesting that the Bible uses a nation for this metaphor?

Part of the reason that Babylon is used, and why the other nations are mentioned here, is because nations represent the most powerful creations of human beings. Nations wield power. Through their population, laws, economies, culture, and military might, nations exert massive influence on the world. And those who control a nation exercise an incredible amount of power. We might say that nations are the highest earthly power.

But Isaiah makes his point that it doesn't matter what nation it is, God rules over it with his sovereignty. They are like pieces on a chessboard. Or something that responds merely to his "whistle" (Isa. 7:18).

Let me show you this in a few other places. We find it in 13:17 where God is stirring up the Medes against the Babylonians. The plan of God will be toward Babylon like it was toward Sodom and Gomorrah (13:19).

In 14:5, the people of God rejoice because they attribute their deliverance to God, "The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked. . ." But perhaps the clearest of all verses in this section is found at the end of chapter 14:

The LORD of hosts has sworn: "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand...This is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (Isa. 14:24, 26-27)

Why is this important? Because it warns the powerful in this life that they are not going to get away with their evil. And it encourages God's people when it seems as though evil is winning the day and out of control. According to Ray Ortlund, Isaiah's vision of God "moderates our anger and frustration now. . .{because} God has scheduled on the human calendar a day of final intervention when he will repay all the dirty deals and broken promises and backstabblings of history with a justice clear enough to satisfy no one less than himself."³ Evil people, tyrannical leaders, and wicked nations will bow their knee to King Jesus. And when you do what is right only to have it turn out badly, just know that there's another

² Gary V. Smith, [Isaiah 1-39](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 298.

³ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [Isaiah: God Saves Sinners](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 125-126.

day coming. When you feel like the whole world is falling apart, know that he has the world in the palm of his hand. God is sovereign.

2) Rebellion

The five oracles of Isaiah 13-20 are filled with clear examples of the sins that marked these nations and brought the judgment of God. Isaiah paints with a broad brush, indicting entire societies and nations because of the prevailing sinfulness of their society.

We get a clear picture and summary of this in Isaiah 13:11:

I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant, and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless (Isa. 13:11).

Isaiah indicts the world for its rebellion against God. The wilful disregard of righteousness reaches a point of no return. Their collective arrogance and their celebration of pride put them on the wrong side of God.

The king of Babylon is charged with acting as if he is a god (14:12-14)—some commentators see an interesting parallel with the fall of Satan. If nothing else, this instance demonstrates the demonic nature of pride.

The same is said about the country of Moab:

We have heard of the pride of Moab— how proud he is!— of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; in his idle boasting he is not right (Isa. 16:6).

Notice the emphasis with five words that are used to make the same point: pride, proud, arrogance, insolence, and boasting. Notice here that it's not just that individual Moabites are proud; their nation is characterized by this pattern of sinful rebellion. Isaiah is concerned about individual sin. But he's also concerned about the danger and tragedy of collective sinfulness. Remember Isaiah 6 when he said, "I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5).

Consider as well the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3. The church at Ephesus is charged with abandoning the love it had at first (Rev. 2:4). The Corinthian church was confronted for being proud because its people were not dealing with a serious moral issue (1 Cor. 5:1-2).

So, we can see that our rebellion is both individual and corporate. They're not the same thing, but they are related. Isaiah has both in mind. And it's important to see that our individual sins have a bigger cumulative effect than what we may realize. We don't just sin by ourselves; we often sin together.

Ray Ortlund says, “Isaiah’s point is that pride is not the bizarre eccentricity of a few megalomaniacs; it’s the spirit of the world.”⁴

To be very clear, I’m not saying that you can repent for the sins of others. But there is a sense in which we can (and should) mourn the sins of our society and culture. Hopefully, you will be part of the faithful remnant pursuing godliness while the world is falling apart. But it should break your heart that rebellion is more than a “me” thing; it’s an “us” thing.

Isaiah identifies the rebellion characterizing the nations. And he also warns about judgment.

3) Judgment

These chapters contain warnings about what it is like to be on the wrong side of a holy God. The powerful and proud nations will be humbled by this day of reckoning.

In 13:6, we see that this moment is called “the day of the Lord.” This is a phrase connected to the execution of divine justice. You could think of it as judgment day. Here are a few verses that summarize this theme:

- 3:6 – The day of the Lord is destructive and assured.
- 3:9 – This day is marked by wrath, divine anger, desolation, and destruction.
- 3:10, 13 – There’s a sense that the created order is shaken and writhing.
- 14:22-23 – Babylon will experience widespread destruction (“a possession of the hedgehog”).
- 15:5-6 – The people of Moab will weep because of their suffering, and they will suffer contempt (16:13).
- 19:1-3 – The gods of Egypt will be discredited. The people will be filled with fear. Internal battles will rage; they will lack wisdom (19:11).

Here is how Isaiah summarizes the coming judgment:

In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts shakes over them. And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians. Everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the purpose that the LORD of hosts has purposed against them (Isa. 19:16–17).

The point of this heavy material is twofold. First, it’s designed to be a warning to the people and the nations who think that they are too powerful to be thwarted. It’s a warning that the God of heaven may be delaying judgment, but it will come.

The second reason is related to hope. Remember this was written to the people of God who were facing divine discipline themselves. These prophecies were written so that they would know where to put their

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [Isaiah: God Saves Sinners](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 129.

hope for vindication and deliverance. This kind of text can cause us to take sin seriously and not be bitter, angry people. Ray Ortlund says, “. . .there is one thing that can save us from becoming vengeful people. It’s a belief in *divine* vengeance. . .And when a confidence in God’s fierce opposition to all human injustice enters our hearts, we have a reason to forsake our savage impulses and love our enemies.”⁵

We can place our hope in God’s ability to make it right because he will.

4) Deliverance

The final theme in these chapters is one of ultimate restoration and hope. The reason these chapters are in Isaiah is to encourage God’s people to be part of the faithful remnant, trusting in God’s plan and embracing obedience.

God will not forget about his people even though he places them under divine discipline. He’s coming back for them:

For the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land, and sojourners will join them and will attach themselves to the house of Jacob (Isa. 14:1).

He will give his people rest from their hardship:

When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve (Isa. 14:3).

God invites people to turn away from the idols of their trust and look to him:

In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense (Isa. 17:7–8).

And there will come a day when nations like Egypt and Assyria will turn to God as well:

And the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. And the LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth (Isa. 19:21–24).

⁵ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 125.

Sovereignty. Rebellion. Judgment. Deliverance.

That's not just the message of Isaiah 13-20, it's the heart of the message of the entire Bible.

If you are not yet a Christian, this text invites you to turn today from trusting in anything but Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. It's an invitation to know that God rules over everything. Our world is broken. We are broken. But there's deliverance in Jesus.

For those who are Christians, this text is a call to be part of the faithful remnant. It's an invitation to hear the warnings in this text, tremble, and run to Jesus as our refuge. It's a reminder to celebrate our life and hope in Christ—God is holy. I am not. Jesus saves. Christ is my life.

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