



God Reigns

God controls the rise and fall of nations and powers.

ISAIAH 23:8-18

Throughout history, we have seen dictators, despots, and other leaders seize control of countries or regions. At the time, some of these leaders and the groups they led appeared to be invincible, carrying an unchecked arrogance as they gained more power. In Isaiah's day, Tyre and Sidon were Phoenician cities on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea that had a vast and powerful financial empire. To the human eye, they seemed invincible, but they were no match for God. God is sovereign over every nation and human seat of power.

What are some things that may cause a person to question who is really in control?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ISAIAH 13:1–23:18

Isaiah's message revealed there will come a time when people from every nation will stream to the house of the Lord to worship Him (Isa. 2:2-4; 11:1-10). However, before this happens, the Lord would bring His purifying judgment on the nations. Hence, Isaiah 13:1–23:18 contains a series of judgment speeches against many of the nations in the ancient Near East, and these proclamations pave the way for Isaiah's message of universal judgment in chapters 24–27. One should recognize a number of things from these speeches:

- The Lord rules over all of the nations. They are all under His authority and will answer to Him.
- Even though Isaiah addressed the various nations in these judgment speeches, the audience who actually received these speeches was Israel. Primarily, their purpose was to inform God's covenant people of God's plans for the nations. God would keep the promises He made to Abraham (Gen. 12:3).
- These oracles serve as a warning to the people of God: if you act like the nations, then God will treat you like the nations. In fact, God would show greater severity to His people given all that they had witnessed Him do for them. They should know better than to act like the pagan nations around them. With a greater knowledge of God comes a greater responsibility to God.
- Although the judgment speeches speak of the destruction of nations and a warning to Israel, they also contain a message of hope for the people of God. Isaiah 14:32 exclaims, "The LORD has founded Zion, and his oppressed people find refuge in her." Therefore, these oracles of judgment against the nations are an exhortation for the people of God to turn away from foreign alliances and put their trust in Him alone. The Lord is their salvation.

As you read Isaiah 23:8-18, what do you see God revealing about Himself concerning the nations and concerning the people of God?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GOD IS JUST (ISA. 23:8-12)

⁸ Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose traders are princes, whose merchants are the honored ones of the earth? ⁹ The LORD of Armies planned it, to desecrate all its glorious beauty, to disgrace all the honored ones of the earth. ¹⁰ Overflow your land like the Nile, daughter of Tarshish; there is no longer anything to restrain you. ¹¹ He stretched out his hand over the sea; he made kingdoms tremble. The LORD has commanded that the Canaanite fortresses be destroyed. ¹² He said, “You will not celebrate anymore, ravished young woman, daughter of Sidon. Get up and cross over to Cyprus — even there you will have no rest!”

VERSE 8

•**Tyre** and Sidon were ancient cities dating as far back as the third millennium BC. Both were coastal cities of the Mediterranean Sea located in Phoenicia west of the mountains of Lebanon and known as great cities of trade. They were the gateway for goods coming and going from the ancient Near East to places in North Africa and Europe. In many ways, they were the center of commerce for the world at that time. People everywhere knew them as opulent and prestigious cities.

DID YOU KNOW?

The king of Tyre supplied lumber and craftsmen for the building of the temple during Solomon’s reign (1 Kings 5:8-9), approximately 280 years before Isaiah.

Isaiah posed a rhetorical question about who would destroy Tyre. Given the fortifications and strength of Tyre, the notion that Tyre would be destroyed would have seemed far-fetched to anyone in Isaiah’s day. Before answering the question, one can almost hear the cynicism in Isaiah’s voice as he described Tyre. He acknowledged the city’s power to establish rulers over their colonies. Tyre traded

with *princes*, an indicator of pronounced power. Also, with the vast wealth amassed by Tyre’s traders, these merchants were the most prestigious ones of that day. In a materialistic culture where amassing wealth was the most prized accomplishment, these importers and exporters enjoyed renown wherever they went.

VERSE 9

Isaiah pointed to the **LORD of Armies** as the One who would bring this notable city down. As impressive as Tyre was and as extraordinary as its inhabitants and those associated with them thought themselves to be, Tyre would be no match for the Lord and His armies. The beauty and pride of Tyre would be desecrated. It would be humbled, and its glory would be no more.

Any who arrogantly look to their own accomplishments and attempt to glorify themselves while continually ignoring Almighty God in due time will be brought low by the God they have disregarded. Verse 9 clearly reveals that God is in control of the nations. In His providential timing, He may allow them to last for a time, but His patience always comes to an end in regard to arrogant nations who thumb their noses at God and make themselves the objects of their own praise. He acts and brings destruction to all who would dare attempt to steal His glory.

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare references that use the same phrase or term.*

Isaiah referred to God as the LORD of Armies in verse 9. Look up 1 Samuel 1:3; 2 Samuel 7:26; Psalm 80:4; Amos 5:14-15; Haggai 2:6-9; and Malachi 1:11-14. Pay attention to the verses surrounding these verses as well. Note the main point being made in each passage. What attributes of God are most seen in this title?

VERSE 10

Tarshish was one of Tyre’s many colonies spread out around the Mediterranean Sea in Cyprus, North Africa, Italy, and Spain.

Tarshish appears to have been located northwest of the Strait of Gibraltar on what is today the southern tip of Spain. As a colony of Tyre, the people of Tarshish were under its rule. It was one of Tyre's most western located colonies. So when Isaiah addressed Tarshish, he appeared to be using it to represent all of Tyre's colonies from those closest to Tyre all the way to Tarshish. Isaiah compared the coming of refugees from Tyre to the waters of the Nile when unrestrained by its banks in the rainy season. The people who were under Tyre's rule would be free to live without its tyranny. Failure to control its colonies would be a sure sign of Tyre's demise.

All nations are powerless before the outstretched hand of the Lord Almighty.

VERSES 11-12

Just as Tyre's influence spread across the ancient Near East, Africa, and Europe, so would the effect of God's judgment be on these lands as the Lord ***stretched out his hand over the sea*** to bring down Tyre's empire of extravagance. The *sea*, Tyre's means to wealth, would be subdued under the Lord's mighty hand. As the sea reached out to all of Tyre's trade partners, all of the kingdoms would ***tremble*** and feel the effect of its demise. All nations are powerless before the outstretched hand of the Lord Almighty. What's more, the Lord had commanded the destruction of all its ***Canaanite*** allies with fortresses north and south of it along the Mediterranean coastline.

The most prominent of Tyre's allies was ***•Sidon*** to the north, and it would suffer greatly. Their happiness and celebration would be as fleeting as their wealth. Isaiah likened Sidon's suffering to that of an abused ***young woman*** who was oppressed and raped. The intensity of their suffering would be so harsh that the inhabitants of Sidon would flee to the island of ***Cyprus***, but even there they would encounter unrest. Like its sister city, Tyre, Sidon would be besieged, overcome, conquered, and driven out to sea.

How does Isaiah's pronouncement against Tyre reveal God's justice? How is recognizing that God is just in all He does just as important as recognizing any of God's other attributes?

GOD IS ACTIVE (ISA. 23:13-14)

¹³ Look at the land of the Chaldeans—a people who no longer exist. Assyria destined it for desert creatures. They set up their siege towers and stripped its palaces. They made it a ruin. ¹⁴ Wail, ships of Tarshish, because your fortress is destroyed!

VERSES 13-14

The *land of the •Chaldeans* was southern Babylon where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet at the tip of the Persian Gulf in southern Iraq today. The Chaldeans at times had a powerful influence over all of Babylon. In fact, there were periods when Chaldeans were the kings of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was a Chaldean king who depleted Judah by taking most of its people into exile, including Daniel and Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar was the Chaldean king who destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC. For this reason, *Chaldean* became synonymous with “Babylonian” in the Old Testament.

Isaiah pointed to Assyria’s defeat of the early Chaldeans as evidence of God’s power in the affairs of His creation. The Assyrian king, Sennacherib, had waged a war of total destruction on the land of Chaldea. The land was so devastated that Chaldea was no threat to anyone for several decades. What once was a land of formidable fortresses and magnificent palaces was turned into a ruin only fit for wild animals. As Isaiah described the desolation that came to the land of Chaldea, his message was that the same fate awaited Tyre and Sidon by the hand of the Lord.

In the same way Isaiah began this judgment speech in verse 1, he concluded this section of it in verse 14, exhorting the *ships of Tarshish* to *wail* because their source of wealth would be no more. Tyre, their fortress and security, would be destroyed. Isaiah goaded the merchants of Tyre’s lucrative, expansive empire to lament in grief over the death of their beloved city. All who put their trust in such enterprises ultimately would be disappointed. In grief and shock, these lords of luxury would witness the unimaginable happen to Tyre and Sidon. Human empires come and go, but only the kingdom of God is eternal.

How does God demonstrate His power through the affairs of nations?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace (Jer. 10:10).

GOD IS HONORED (ISA. 23:15-18)

¹⁵ On that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years—the life span of one king. At the end of seventy years, what the song says about the prostitute will happen to Tyre: ¹⁶ Pick up your lyre, stroll through the city, you forgotten prostitute. Play skillfully, sing many a song so that you will be remembered. ¹⁷ And at the end of the seventy years, the LORD will restore Tyre and she will go back into business, prostituting herself with all the kingdoms of the world throughout the earth. ¹⁸ But her profits and wages will be dedicated to the LORD. They will not be stored or saved, for her profit will go to those who live in the LORD's presence, to provide them with ample food and sacred clothing.

VERSES 15-16

Isaiah closed his judgment speech by shifting from poetry to narrative to reveal even more of what will happen to **Tyre** after its destruction. Tyre would be erased from the thoughts of the world where it once had been so prominent. The world would go about its business as if Tyre never existed. The city that once was the center of international trade and had the greatest influence on the nations in that part of the world would be a lost memory. Tyre would be forgotten for *seventy years*. Isaiah stated this was *the life span of one king*. This is likely referring to the lifespan of a kingdom (as the same word in Hebrew may refer to a king or kingdom). The kingdom Isaiah probably referred to was the Assyrian Empire. In 701 BC, Sennacherib marched his armies along the Mediterranean coast, and one of the cities he attacked was Tyre. From that time until the Assyrian Empire began to decline, Assyria maintained control of Phoenicia. Since Tyre would be irrelevant during that time, Isaiah provided no further elaboration on what would happen to it during the seventy-year period.

Isaiah then used a song about a prostitute to describe what would happen to Tyre. The song is about a prostitute whose customers have moved on to someone else, showing her no more interest. Since no one was any longer knocking at her door, she resorted to going out into the streets to play her *lyre* for people to remember her. One song would not be enough. She would need to sing *many a song* to get attention. Why did Isaiah use a prostitute as his metaphor for Tyre? Tyre's entire existence was for the materialistic, fleshly appetite of humanity. Tyre's rise to prominence was fueled by catering to human desires.

VERSES 17-18

Even though Tyre would try to regain its prominence, it would only happen when the Lord decided to restore her after seventy years. Every nation and every superpower is under the providential sovereign rule of Almighty God. At that time, Tyre would resume its past ways of *prostituting herself with all the kingdoms of the world throughout the earth*. This means it would regain its standing in the world of international trade that reached as far as from Britain to India.

However, there is a twist to Tyre's resurgence. Tyre would not be like the prostitute who plied her trade for her own selfish gain. Instead, her profits would be *dedicated to the LORD* and go to supply the needs of the temple and its priests in Jerusalem when the exiles returned from Babylon. When the Persian King Cyrus gave his edict proclaiming that the exiled Judeans could return home after living in exile for seventy years, he said that God had appointed him to build His temple in Jerusalem. He also declared that the people in the region should assist the returned exiles with "silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:4). The Lord turned what Tyre once used for its self-glorification into resources to be used for His own glory and the blessing of His people.

What can one conclude about the nations' relationship to God based on Isaiah 23:15-18?

APPLY THE TEXT

- God is just in all He does.
- God actively directs the affairs of His creation.
- God’s plan includes all nations honoring Him.

List situations in your life that make you question God’s justice. Ask God to give you insight, committing to trust Him as He carries out His plans.

What evidence do you see that proves God actively directs the affairs of His creation? How does seeing this evidence give you confidence to remain faithful to Him? What actions do you need to take to build upon that confidence in God?

How can you honor God this week? List one action you will take to specifically honor God, and identify how that action will honor Him.

PRAYER NEEDS
