

Lesson 11 Isaiah 21-23 The Second Cycle of Oracles

Introduction

Isaiah has just unleashed poetic judgment on Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Israel, and Egypt. He also managed to draw in Assyria, Syria, and Cush. And that was just the first cycle of five oracles. Isaiah feels complete freedom to prophesy hope or doom on any people in the name of Yahweh. They can be regional neighbors, they can be far off peoples, or they can be the major super-powers of the era. Isaiah does not recognize the authority of any peoples' own gods. He recognizes Yahweh as the right ruler over all people. Everyone owes the God of Israel homage. That's not unique to Isaiah. All the major prophetic works - Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel - dedicate space to judgment on other nations. So do some of the shorter prophecies. Jonah is all about proclaiming judgment on Nineveh. Nahum does the same. Amos targets Israel, but not until he first warms up on Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab.

We recognized the placement of Ephraim in our first cycle at the center of the nations with one oracle going to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. Israel holds a central place. What does that mean, to put Israel at the center? How are we supposed to understand the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, that is, all the other nations of the world? Before we get into the five oracles of this second cycle, let's step back for a moment and think about the big picture Biblical story. What is God's relationship with the nations of the earth and how does God's special people Israel fit into that relationship?

Genesis 1-11 serves as a preface to the Torah – the first five books of the Bible: the Law - giving us a synopsis of history before the calling of Abraham. Through most of that synopsis humanity is larger addressed as a whole. Emphasis on separate nations occurs as the descendants of Noah spread out and is intensified at the Tower of Babel. Human civilization came together in arrogant self-sufficiency to raise themselves up and bring God down. They insisted on making a name for themselves. God did not relinquish His claim on the nations at the tower of Babel. God may have punished them. He may have divided them, but He did not relinquish His claim on the nations at the tower of Babel. What He did was include a special focus on a people that was not yet a people.

God divided the nations and then chose a new nation with whom to covenant. Abraham was not to make a name for himself like the people at Babel. God told Abraham, "I will make your name great. I will make you a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1-3)." God did not choose the one special nation as a rejection of all other peoples. He chose one nation as a witness through which the rest might come back into relationship with Him. Abraham's seed is to bless the nations.

The Old Testament emphasizes how God used the practice of ancient Near Eastern covenant to communicate the nature of His relationship with people. We can divide the Biblical covenants into common grace covenants, that define relationship with all of humanity; and special grace covenants, that define relationship with a particular group. God's special grace covenants do not set aside the common grace covenants.

There are four major special grace covenants in Scripture. It is easiest to identify those covenants with the four special prophets God used as covenant mediators: Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. God established the Covenant of promise through Abraham with his family, the Covenant of law through Moses with the nation Israel, the Covenant of kingship through David with his heirs, and the Covenant of grace through Jesus with the Church. These Covenants are all related to one another and are fulfilled in Jesus. We who have relationship with God today rightly understand our relationship with God through the New Covenant, which I've called "the covenant of grace." That's following Paul in Romans. The believing Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who lived before Jesus rightly defined their relationship with God through the Old Covenant, which Paul referred to as "The covenant of Law."

Those are the special grace covenants: the Covenant of promise, Law, kingship, and of grace. There are two common grace covenants in Scripture. Common grace covenants are established with all of

humankind. The first common grace covenant was established in Genesis 1 and 2 through Adam and Eve, the first king and queen who were made in the image of God and commissioned to rule over the creation. That covenant was with all of their descendants. A second common grace covenant renewed that earlier through Noah with his descendants. Before the Flood in Genesis 6:18 God promised Noah, "I will establish my covenant with you." That's why Noah was required to take 7 pairs of certain clean animals, so that there would be animals to sacrifice and ratify the covenant. After the Flood, God communicates with Noah using the covenant language he had used with Adam and Eve. So, in Genesis 9:1, "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" Jumping down to verse 9, God affirms what has just happened, "I myself do establish my covenant with you, and with your descendants after you."

The common grace covenant was not set aside after the Tower of Babel. The special grace covenant was added as a means by which to reach all peoples through a special group of people. There is one God, creator of all peoples, whose heart longs for everyone to come into relationship with Him. God always has been and always will be God of the nations. The major role of all believers who have come under special grace covenant, whether the Old Covenant back then or the New Covenant now, is to act as a kingdom of priests, bringing glory to God by living for Him as a holy people, and by extending His invitation to all others to enter into covenant relationship.

Isaiah helps us to see that the relationship between the peoples of the world and the people of God is one that includes both threat and hope. The threat of being surrounded by the nations of the world is two-fold. The nations might reject, hate, or oppress the people of God as they try to live differently for God. Or the people of God might adopt the practices of the nations to try and fit in or to succeed like they see others succeeding. Our first set of oracles mostly dealt with the nations as threat. And the prophecies emphasized God's judgment on the nations for their rejection of Him and their treatment of His people.

But in every oracle Isaiah also included a glimmer of hope. Isaiah had set a precedent for that back in chapter 2 with the image of a Zion that will include a believing remnant of Jews together with peoples of the earth who had said, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord that he may teach us concerning his ways." Our first cycle developed this picture of future hope, both for a remnant of Jews and also for included Gentiles. In fact, we ended with the incredible picture of Egyptians, Assyrians, and Jews worshiping God together and sharing equally in His inheritance.

That hope, shining through the gloom in the first cycle will only barely peak out in the second cycle. Hope becomes obscured by the shadow of human evil. Moving into the second set of oracles, Isaiah's vision seems less concrete and more abstract. That may be intended to correspond to his gazing into the future. It is similar to how the clear lines of a building or a mountain become blurred in our sight the farther away we are. From a distance we don't see things clearly. That may be what is happening here, in these oracles. For example, Isaiah mostly uses symbolic names to identify the recipients. The lines are drawn less clearly. Historical context for the oracles is mostly lost. And hope is covered by shadow. We cannot see it.

This section is shorter than our last, spanning only three chapters. So, I'll read the text. Still, it is three chapters, so I'll keep moving, stopping to emphasize the main principle of each oracle and to address several interesting references.

I will start with a principle from our last set of oracles. Isaiah has been presenting God as the true king, sovereign over all peoples. And that principle was stated clearly at the end of our very first oracle, back in Isaiah 14:26-27.

²⁶ "This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. ²⁷ "For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate *it*? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?"

That plan includes judgment and hope. And as we peer ahead, the problems are going to seem to be without solution. Hope is lost in the gloom.

The Desert By the Sea (Babylon): The Fall of the Gods (21:1-10)

We begin with the oracle to Babylon in Isaiah 21:1-10. I will take it in parts, starting with verses 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 treacherously,
and the destroyer *still* destroys.

Go up, Elam, lay siege, Media;

I have made an end of all the groaning she has caused.

The windstorms in the Negev put us in Judah. The natural phenomena of windstorms symbolizes windstorms of human politics and conflict. The storms come from a terrifying land of treachery and destruction. Babylon is not clearly identified by the phrase “desert” or “wilderness by the sea.” The city of Babylon sat on the Euphrates, closer to the Persian Gulf. That area is between the two rivers, and it should be lush and fertile, so calling it a “desert” or “wilderness by the sea” looks ahead to the devastation that is coming. Elam and Media are neighbors of Babylon, and here they are called by God to lay siege. Though Babylon is an enemy of Judah, Isaiah is going to recoil in horror of the war to come. He waits for riders to come from Babylon to announce the results. This in verses 3-10.

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.

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.”

⁸ Then the lookout called,

“O Lord, on the watchtower,

I stand continually by day

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.”

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.

God’s people of Judah are the ones who have been threshed. It’s hard to understand in this what is Isaiah looking for. It’s like he is expecting an army to come from Babylon. Is he anguished over what he sees is happening to Babylon, or is he anguished over what might happen to Judah? I’m not sure. Thinking about ancient empire: empires like Assyria, and Babylon, and Persia, they bullied smaller nations like Judah, limiting their freedoms, exacting tribute. But empires also tended to bring in a kind of enforced peace. Kind of like the Pax Romana, you know, that later phrase for Rome, “the peace of Rome”, yeah, it’s peace, but how do the Germanic tribes feel about that peace? It was enforced on them when they were crushed. There is this reality of peace, but it comes at a cost to the smaller peoples. But it does mean this: it means that the fall of an empire inevitably means warfare among regional powers as they struggle to re-assert dominance over neighbors, and warfare as major powers seek to establish who is the new “big guy”; can they step into the void and create their own empire?

The main idea of this oracle comes out in verse 9, “And one said, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods are shattered on the ground.’” The security provided by empires is both costly

and temporary. Babylon's gods are fallen. They promised power, security, affluence, but those promises are based on a failed world view. Their spiritual assumptions are vain and corrupt. The security provided by Babylon lures the faithful to adopt their values and their practices. There's always a cost. And Babylon must fall. Every empire falls. It's limited. It's temporary. The promises of Babylon will fail with her gods, shattered on the ground.

Silence (Edom): The Prolongation of Time (21:11-12)

The next oracle concerns Dumah, that is the Hebrew word used here. It literally means "silence". It was also the name of one of Ishmael's sons (Genesis 25:14). The later reference to Seir definitely connects the oracle to the land of Edom. It is just two verses, 21:11-12.

¹¹ The oracle concerning [silence].

One keeps calling to me from Seir,	"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."

The word for "lookout" in the previous oracle – looking out for the army to come - is similar to "watchman" here. The lookout brought news of Babylon's fall. Isaiah's question here, "How far gone is the night?" pictures a night watchman, whose duty is to call out the watches of the night, to let us know how far we are away from dawn. The image fits any trial or troubling time that we might find ourselves in. We are asking ourselves, "How long the night, Lord? How long the night?"

Isaiah has just heard the first report of the empire's fall. How long the night? Warfare is coming. Instability. When will security be re-established? Or maybe we are looking even further ahead, "Oh, Lord, when will this whole age end? When will human empire end and the reign of Zion begin?"

The watchman's answer, "Morning comes, but also night. If you would inquire, inquire; come back again." That's no answer. And that's not the answer we want from God. The oracle is aptly named, "Silence". Mornings must come, nights must fall, mornings will come again. You are welcome to inquire and inquire again. The times will not be yet made known. Expect night to break, light to come, and night to fall again.

Desert Evening (Arabian Tribes): Needs But No Solutions (21:13-17)

Like with the word "dumah" in the preceding oracle, the Hebrew for the next oracle is not clear. My Bible chooses the more concrete translation, "Arabia." Motyer likes the translation "desert evenings" and says the reference is not to Arabia as a nation but to the tribes of Arabia. Isaiah 21:13-17.

¹³ The oracle [concerning the desert evening].

In the thickets of Arabia	you must spend the night, O caravans of Dedanites.
¹⁴ For the thirsty,	bring water
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; ¹⁷and 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."

There are a lot of references here we have probably never heard of. The Dedanites were an Arabian tribe. Tema was an oasis city and a caravan center far to the southeast of Judah, out in the Arabian Peninsula. Kedar was also an Arabian tribe, and it was the name of the northern extension of Arabian desert, part closest to Babylon. Archeological records affirm that Arabian tribes were involved in the politics of the times. The Assyrian king Sargon II campaigned against Arabian tribes in 715. And in 703 tribes joined the Babylonians against the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

The fall of Babylon depicted in the first oracle spreads instability throughout the former empire. I think we should interpret the oracle as picturing the Dedanites fleeing war. And since Kedar is in the north, closer to Babylon, we can imagine warfare starting there, pushing refugees south towards Tema. And the refugees must spend the night in the thickets of Arabia. They are out in the wilderness. They are in an insecure place. And they need to be met with bread and water.

Where is the security in human empire? It's bleeding. It comes, it goes. It will be broken. Security will be lost. Human need increases.

The Valley of Vision (Jerusalem): The Unforgiveable Sin (22:1-25)

Moving on to the fourth oracle, we come again to the people of God. As in the first cycle, they are symbolically surrounded by peoples of the earth. First was Babylon to the north, then Edom to the south, Arabia to the east, and we are going to end with Tyre to the west. How will the people of God respond to the reality of living in the midst of other peoples? Will they embrace their role as a city on a hill, shining a light for others to see?

Well, they did not in the first cycle. The people of God Israel rejected the way of faith for an alliance with the world. Ephraim sought security in treaty with Damascus, even to the point of turning on Judah, which is an interesting image for us as the people of God today. How does the Church respond to the fact that it exists in secular cultures surrounded by people who do not share the Church's worldview or values? Will we be a light on a hill? Sometimes not. Sometimes the Church acts like Ephraim, making a treaty with the world, seeking security by exchanging the way of faith to become more acceptable to secular peoples, and even turning on Christians who desire to maintain the values and beliefs of Biblical truth.

Is that how the people of God, Judah, respond to being surrounded by the nations of the earth in this second cycle? Is Judah making a treaty here with a foreign power? Well, no, they are not. That is not going to be a problem here. The problem here is self-sufficiency. Judah is just going to press ahead, ignoring the discipline of God and, in their own optimistic strategies they are going to fix things themselves. Which is another lesson for Church. We might adopt the strategies and the "we can do it" kind of attitude of the world, and forget our first love for Christ, and forget that everything depends on our faith in God.

The oracle is for the valley of vision. Later in the passage it will be made clear that this is Judah. Isaiah is going to begin with a lament that the people of Judah don't die in battle but are carried off as slaves. This is verses 1-4.

¹ The oracle concerning the valley of vision.

What is the matter with you now, that you have all gone up to the housetops?

² You who were full of noise, you boisterous town, you exultant city;

Your slain were not slain with the sword, Nor did they die in battle.

³ All your rulers have fled together, *And* have been captured without the bow;

All of you who were found were taken captive Though they had fled far away.

together,

⁴ Therefore I say, "Turn your eyes away from me,

Let me weep bitterly,

Do not try to comfort me concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people."

Then in 5-8a Isaiah envisions invaders taking up position and overwhelming Jerusalem.

⁵ For it is a day of panic, subjugation and confusion For the Lord GOD of hosts

In the valley of vision, a breaking down of walls And a crying to the mountain.

⁶ Elam took up the quiver With the chariots, infantry *and* horsemen;

And Kir uncovered the shield.

⁷ Then your choicest valleys were full of chariots,

And the horsemen took up fixed positions at the gate.

⁸ And He removed the defense of Judah.

Isaiah paints a picture of foreign peoples from Elam and Kir invading Judah. Elam had gone up to attack Babylon. They got news that Babylon has fallen. There is no rejoicing, because Isaiah knows what is coming next. You know, one empire falls, another people takes up its place. And this is no raiding party. This is a fully arrayed army with chariots, infantry, and horsemen. Maybe we get here an explanation for the oracles reference to “valley of the vision.” In the valley of vision walls are broken down and a cry goes up to the mountain. It’s like someone is down in the valley and they are crying out, and there are mountains all around. And this is the place Isaiah is having the vision. It’s as though he is walking in the valley of the shadow of death. And he cries out, “Let me weep bitterly, do not try to comfort me.” And I think that’s what’s meant by “valley of the vision.” This is the dreadful place where Isaiah sees the destruction of his own people.

He describes a human army, but the beginning and ending of this sub-section, verses 5a and 8a attribute the devastation to “the Lord GOD of hosts...he removed the defense of Judah.” That name, “Lord GOD of hosts” we encountered four times in chapter 10. It was the name, “Adonai Yahweh Sabaoth.” And it emphasizes the Lord’s sovereignty as He uses one nation to punish another. All nations are His host and He directs them where He wills. When He opens, they can enter, and when He shuts they must be turned away. In chapter 10 the punishment fell on Assyria. It was for the vindication of the people of God. Here the Lord God of hosts removes His protecting hand from Judah, allowing another punishing host to enter in.

The turn in the passage comes in the next section. How will the people of God respond to the Lord’s punishment?

In that day you depended on the weapons of the house of the forest,
⁹ And the breaches on the wall You saw were many;
of the city of David

And you collected the waters of the lower pool.

¹⁰ Then you counted the houses of Jerusalem And tore down houses to fortify the wall.
¹¹ And you made a reservoir between the two walls For the waters of the old pool.
But you did not depend on Him who made it, Nor did you take into consideration Him
who planned it long ago.

They depended on their own abilities. They have got some great crisis managers going on here. There are breaches in the walls, and they are tearing down houses, “Let’s fill up those breaches! Fill it up!” They are going to have a problem with their water, so they are redirecting the flow of water to form a new reservoir with new defenses. “But you did not depend on Him who made it.” They are refashioning Jerusalem to try to handle this crisis that is pouring through so many places in the wall, but in the crisis you did not “take into consideration Him who planned it long ago.” There is no thought of God’s role in this. They don’t consider that the invading army was directed by the outstretched arm of God, even though they have prophecy telling them that that’s so. And they don’t turn to God in prayer, and they don’t repent. Discipline does no good for those who refuse to consider their own ways; to turn from their path of self-destruction and to cry out to God. Verses 12-14.

¹² Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts called in that day
to weeping, to wailing, To shaving the head and to wearing sackcloth.
¹³ Instead, there is gaiety and gladness, Killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep,
Eating of meat and drinking of wine: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die.”
¹⁴ But the LORD of hosts revealed Himself to me, “Surely this iniquity shall not be forgiven you
Until you die,” says the Lord GOD of hosts.

It is this ironic picture of, in the midst of the weeping, and the wailing, and the destruction coming on Jerusalem there is this gaiety and gladness that is human rejection of the facts that surround them.

“Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we may die,” but there is no consideration of God. And Isaiah says, “Surely, this iniquity shall not be forgiven you.” This is an unforgivable sin. And there is a connection here with the unforgivable sin in Matthew 12:31. There Jesus says that speaking against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. In that context, the leaders of Israel have seen the works Jesus is doing and have claimed Jesus employs demonic spirits. So, the works of Jesus: healing the lame, giving sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf were prophesied by Isaiah and others so that the leaders of Israel could identify the Messiah. But in seeing those signs – signs of the Holy Spirit – they say, “That is of Satan!” So, it creates this unforgivable situation, because Jesus is the source of forgiveness, and signs were given to prove that Jesus is that source, and they call the signs “of Satan.” And in rejecting the signs they reject Jesus: they reject God’s way of forgiveness. They cannot be forgiven.

In this day, God has sent prophets to tell the people, “Invasion is going to come to punish you for sin!” And the point of letting them know this is so that they might repent. If that prophecy comes true and the people of Judah refuse to accept it as discipline from God, instead they ignore God, and they continue in their way, they will not be convicted of sin, they will not repent, they will not experience forgiveness.

In the first cycle, Israel turned from the walk of faith by making alliance with Damascus. Here, Judah turns from the walk of faith by adopting the human attitude of self-reliance. The actions of Judah’s leaders in crisis to patch the walls and reroute the water supply is not a problem in and of itself. Nehemiah will be commended for his initiative in rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls. He took that initiative as an outworking of faith, not as a substitute for faith. What we see in these people is they have blinders on, and they refuse to acknowledge spiritual reality. “We can fix this! We can fix this!” Then there is no forgiveness, if you refuse with your eyes to see and with your ears to hear; there is no hope.

The oracle is not done yet. Isaiah does something interesting here that he doesn’t do anywhere else in this whole section of three cycles. He shifts from consideration of nations to consideration of two individuals. He is going to name two people. And in doing so, he reminds us that when the Bible characterizes a people as either rebellious or faithful, that characterization always assumes individual attitudes and actions. Individuals choose to trust God. Individuals choose to rebel against God. Talking about nations is a way of talking collectively about a whole group of individuals. Isaiah has been talking about Judah as group. Now he gives us an example of an individual.

Isaiah’s example of Shebna, steward of the king’s household, is also going to serve a second purpose. He is both an individual example of self-reliance and he is going to be an interim fulfillment of prophecy. The fall of Jerusalem is not going to happen in Isaiah’s day. It is going to be another 100 years. The fall of Shebna does happen in Isaiah’s day. Shebna and Eliakim are contemporaries of Isaiah. Shebna represents the self-sufficiency attributed to the nation as a whole. Eliakim represents the walk of faith the nation is called to follow. Isaiah’s prediction of the fates of these two individuals, the demotion of Shebna and the elevation of Eliakim, seems to have already come true by the time we get to the story of Hezekiah in Isaiah 36. 36:3 mentions Eliakim as head of the king’s household, not Shebna. Shebna is referred to as “a scribe.” So, God has given Isaiah a vision that is going to come true in his own time, to serve as a sign that this later vision of Jerusalem’s fall is also going to come true, even though we have to wait 100 years for it.

This is what Isaiah has to say about Shebna, verses 15-19.

- | | | |
|----|--|--|
| 15 | Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts,
“Come, go to this steward, | To Shebna, who is in charge of the <i>royal</i> household, |
| 16 | ‘What right do you have here, and whom do you
have here,
You who hew a tomb on the height, | That you have hewn a tomb for yourself here,

You who carve a resting place for yourself
in the rock? |
| 17 | ‘Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong,
O man. | And He is about to grasp you firmly |

- ¹⁸ *And roll you tightly like a ball,
There you will die* *To be cast into a vast country;
And there your splendid chariots will be,
You shame of your master's house.'*
- ¹⁹ "I will depose you from your office,
And I will pull you down from your station."

Isaiah gives us this example of Shebna's self-centeredness in his description of his tomb that Shebna has carved for himself. The kind of man who thinks his future legacy is best maintained by a rich, ornate tomb for everybody to see after he dies, that is not the kind of man who serves to love God and God's people. He thinks of his own future in very materialistic terms without giving due attention to the future needs of Judah. Isaiah says that God will cast him away. He is going to roll him like a ball and throw him away like a dirty garment. He is a shame to the house of David. He will be deposed.

The section about Eliakim is bracketed by the phrase "in that day." That phrase can look ahead to the day of judgment or look ahead 100 years to the day of Jerusalem's fall. But here, the phrase emphasizes God's sovereign action in the life of an individual. "In that day" it's going to be God doing something in a particular day in Eliakim's life. God can humble a mighty man and He can raise up another whenever He desires. Verses 20-25.

- ²⁰ "Then it will come about in that day, That I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah,
²¹ And I will clothe him with your tunic and tie your sash securely about him. I will entrust him with your authority, and he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²² "Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open. ²³ "I will drive him *like* a peg in a firm place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father's house. ²⁴ "So they will hang on him all the glory of his father's house, offspring and issue, all the least of vessels, from bowls to all the jars. ²⁵ "In that day," declares the LORD of hosts, "the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken."

This passage gives us another connection to Jesus' ministry. In Matthew 16:19 Jesus says to Peter something very similar to what Isaiah has just said about Eliakim,

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

The idea of receiving keys and authority is best understood by the image of a household steward. That's the meaning of the words here in 22:22 when Isaiah says of Eliakim,

Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open.

Peter and the Apostles (later included in Matthew 18:18) were commissioned to act as stewards in this same sense. They do not open or shut Heaven on their own authority. They cannot say someone is forgiven or not forgiven: it's not in them. They act on the authority of Jesus. They proclaim the gospel message of their King. If a person accepts that Gospel message, the Apostles, acting on the authority of Jesus, can declare that person forgiven. Heaven has been opened to them. If a person rejects the Gospel message of Jesus, the Apostles have the authority to declare that Heaven is shut, because you have rejected Jesus, you have rejected the words of the King.

So that is kind of cool. This reference to Eliakim, steward of David's house, helps us to understand the context of Jesus' words to His apostles. In the current context, Eliakim is Isaiah's example of a man who walks by faith. We also see in Eliakim the danger that exists for all who lead in God's service. Eliakim is faithful. He is going to be raised to a position of glory. The opposite of Shebna, he is like a peg in the house of David on which pots and garments then can hang. He is solid and he is useful for his Master. He is not the Messiah. He is not king David. The glory is not his own. When he serves God well, he is still but a peg in the household. That should be a humbling image for Eliakim. There is glory, but glory in the right place. It is also necessary for the people to understand the image, because it is said of Eliakim, "He will be like a father to the people." He is going to be a faithful

leader. He is going to bless many. But no matter how faithful, or fruitful, or gifted a man or woman of God might be, they must never become the ones we depend on. The walk of faith is not a walk of self-sufficiency, and it is not dependence on the sufficiency of other human beings, no matter how spiritually good they might be as a teacher, or a mentor, or a pastor, or a model. So, we get what I think is a warning in the last verse.

“In that day,” declares the LORD of hosts, “the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken.”

Now, that could be coming back to a reference about Shebna. He is the peg broken off. But we have really emphasized Eliakim as the peg. So, I think what is being said is that Eliakim himself will one day give way. Every human peg is a peg. Every peg eventually breaks off. We all diminish, even those who preserve faithfully through all their days. The curse of death is on us all. We are mortal. Do not place your faith in a strong spiritual leader. That leader cannot believe in God for you. Your walk is your walk. Isaiah is calling every individual in Judah to repent and to personally trust in God.

Tyre: Pride and Holiness (23:1-18)

We come now to the last oracle in this cycle, the oracle to Tyre. If Babylon represents the pride of a military and cultural empire, Tyre represents the pride of an economic empire. Tyre is a port city to the northeast of Israel on the Mediterranean coast. Along with other Phoenician city-states like Sidon and Byblos, Tyre built up wealth and influence through maritime trade. That influence included the spread of their particular brand of Baal worship, which notably affected the northern people of Israel through Jezebel, princess of Tyre, wife of king Ahab, and nemesis of the prophet Elijah. There is a cost to their influence.

Tyre colonized settlements around the Mediterranean as a growing trade network. The most famous colony of Tyre was Carthage on the north African coast. The influence of Phoenician culture can be detected in the most famous son of Carthage, whose name I bet you’ve heard – Hannibal. Hannibal’s name comes from two Semitic words, “hanna” and “bal,” - Hannibal. It literally means, “the grace of baal.” Where they spread their influence, Tyre is spreading its worldview.

Major nations like Egypt depended on Tyre to provide a market for grain and other products. That trade network extended as far as Tarshish, where Jonah wanted to flee to. That is in modern day Spain.

The main oracle begins and ends with a lament, “Wail, for Tyre is destroyed, without house or harbor...”, after which we have a short post-script. Between the statements of lament, we have two sub-sections. The first, in 2-7, describes the downfall of Tyre and Sidon.

¹ The oracle concerning Tyre.

Wail, O ships of Tarshish,
From the land of Cyprus

For Tyre is destroyed, without house or harbor;
It is reported to them.

² Be silent, you inhabitants of the coastland,
Your messengers crossed the sea
The grain of the Nile, the harvest of the River
was her revenue;

You merchants of Sidon;
³ And were on many waters.
And she was the market of nations.

⁴ Be ashamed, O Sidon;
the stronghold of the sea, saying,
“I have neither travailed nor given birth,

For the sea speaks,
I have neither brought up young men
nor reared virgins.”

⁵ When the report reaches Egypt,

They will be in anguish at the report of Tyre.

⁶ Pass over to Tarshish;

Wail, O inhabitants of the coastland.

⁷ Is this your jubilant city,
Whose feet used to carry her

Whose origin is from antiquity,
to colonize distant places?

exile, Tyre and Sidon will send supplies to Jerusalem under the order of Cyrus the Great to help rebuild the Temple. Benefit like this from the human society is one of the ways God's people relate to the peoples of the Earth. Societies exist under common grace covenant with God to promote God's plans for His people. All people's, in a sense, exist for the people of God. In that sense, Tyre was allowed to exist for the sake of Israel. You know, another example is the Roman road system that paved the way for the Gospel spread of the first century. Rome did not know that it existed to help God's people proclaim Jesus. Or Internet and phone apps today. The secular society doesn't know that one of the reasons that they have been allowed to exist is to enable Biblical truth to enter into every closed nation of the Earth.

The infrastructure, lawful order, and multitude of services provided by secular governments exist so that the people of God might fulfill the purpose God has called them to fulfill. That is one of the realities explaining the relationship of the people of God to the peoples of the world. Common grace kingdom exists for the special grace kingdom. But in another sense, special grace kingdom exists for the common grace kingdom. We exist for them. God made a special grace covenant with Abraham, and then with Moses, and now through Jesus with the Church so that through us all the nations of the world might be blessed. We exist to be a city on a hill, so that everybody can hear about the goodness and grace of God. And maybe there is a glimmer of that in the last verse, some effect on Tyre. They are no longer storing or hoarding up for themselves. They bring tribute to the Lord. In these dark times of shadow, human self-sufficiency fails to meet human need. Empires fall. Leaders fail. Systems break down. Society cannot meet our deepest needs. Still, God offers hope to everybody who will turn away from failed human systems and turn to Him as Savior and Lord.