

Lesson 29 Isaiah 47:1-15 Babylon Conquered

Introduction

Isaiah's description of the Great Deliverance in chapters 44-48 takes us through three different perspectives of the same event. This is prophecy at such a high level. One hundred years before the event, God pinpoints with precision this major, major event in salvation history. This is not the first time the Bible has announced what is to come. God foretold through Moses in Deuteronomy that Israel would experience both the curse of exile and the grace of restoration. "When all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind...in all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you...the Lord your God will restore you from captivity..." That's Deuteronomy 30. That's Moses.

That prophecy came 800 years in advance. God's Old Covenant test case with Israel is going to fail. Just as God knew before he created Adam and Eve that they would fail to be faithful, God also knew that after He established the nation of Israel at Sinai, they would fail to be faithful. Through 800 years, generations of Israelites wandered away from God, came back to God, wandered away, came back. God's people continually pushed the limits of His grace and mercy. That limit will finally and irrevocably be breached and the prophecy of wrath fulfilled. God will spit the Israelites out of the land, just as he did Amorites before them. That moment of justice will be carried out by Babylon. Isaiah adds that detail to the prophecy. Babylon will be God's instrument. Judah will be exiled. But just as Moses prophesied, Isaiah also prophesies redemption after the exile. There will be a new Exodus. A future generation will be brought safely home.

Isaiah sees these two crucial mileposts in salvation history, the curse of sin culminating in the exile of Judah; followed by the grace of God to restore Israel after a new Exodus. Isaiah is describing this great deliverance through three prophetic perspectives. We could label these perspectives as beginning, middle, and end. All three look to the future. At the beginning we get the Cyrus prophecy, that specific and unbelievable declaration of restoration through an unknown leader named, Cyrus. The Cyrus prophecy foresees the rescue from Babylon of an already defeated Israel.

Isaiah began with the Cyrus prophecy. He then shifted to the middle perspective of Israel's response to that plan. God treats Israel's obstinate resistance with a firm stance. The same elements present in the beginning perspective are also present in the middle perspective. Judah is defeated, exiled to Babylon, they're free from Babylon, and Israel is restored. God will not give up on Israel, in spite of Israel.

First, the prophecy, then the response, now the fulfillment. That is beginning, middle, and end. This third perspective assumes again the defeat of Judah; the exile to Babylon; freedom from Babylon; and the restoration of Israel, but from the perspective of the end: the perspective of the actual defeat of Babylon and the actual release of the Jews. So first, we had the Cyrus prophecy. Then we had Israel's response. Now in this lesson we are considering the actual fall of Babylon and the release of the Jews.

This third perspective has those two adjoining parts, the fall of Babylon in chapter 47; and the corresponding release of Israel in chapter 48.

The Fall of Babylon 47:1-15

We begin with chapter 47, the fall of Babylon.

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| ¹ "Come down and sit in the dust,
Sit on the ground without a throne,
For you shall no longer be called | O virgin daughter of Babylon;
O daughter of the Chaldeans!
tender and delicate. |
| ² "Take the millstones and grind meal.
Uncover the leg, cross the rivers. | Remove your veil, strip off the skirt, |
| ³ "Your nakedness will be uncovered,
I will take vengeance | Your shame also will be exposed;
and will not spare a man." |

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| <p>4 Our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts is His name,
5 "Sit silently, and go into darkness,
For you will no longer be called
6 "I was angry with My people,
And gave them into your hand.
You did not show mercy to them,
7 "Yet you said, 'I will be a queen forever.'
Nor remember the outcome of them.</p> <p>8 "Now, then, hear this, you sensual one,
Who says in your heart,
I will not sit as a widow,
9 "But these two things will come on you
Loss of children and widowhood.
In spite of your many sorceries,
10 "You felt secure in your wickedness and said,
Your wisdom and your knowledge,
For you have said in your heart,
11 "But evil will come on you
And disaster will fall on you
And destruction about which you do not know
12 "Stand fast now in your spells
With which you have labored from your youth;
Perhaps you will be able to profit,
13 "You are wearied with your many counsels;
Those who predict by the new moons,
14 "Behold, they have become like stubble,
They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame;
There will be no coal to warm by
15 "So have those become to you with whom
you have labored,
Each has wandered in his own way;</p> | <p>The Holy One of Israel.
O daughter of the Chaldeans,
The queen of kingdoms.
I profaned My heritage
On the aged you made your yoke very heavy.
These things you did not consider
Who dwells securely,
'I am, and there is no one besides me.
Nor know loss of children.'
suddenly in one day:
They will come on you in full measure
In spite of the great power of your spells.
'No one sees me,'
they have deluded you;
'I am, and there is no one besides me.'
Which you will not know how to charm away;
For which you cannot atone;
Will come on you suddenly.
And in your many sorceries
Perhaps you may cause trembling.
Let now the astrologers, those who prophesy
by the stars,
Stand up and save you from what will come
upon you.
Fire burns them;
Nor a fire to sit before!
Who have trafficked with you from your youth;
There is none to save you.</p> |
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Scholars divide this poem into six stanzas of roughly equal length. Those six stanzas can be grouped in pairs to make three parts with two stanzas each. I like Oswalt's titles for the three parts, "Babylon's humiliation"; "Babylon's pride"; and, "Babylon's helplessness." I don't usually alliterate, but just for fun let's change that to, "Babylon's humiliation"; "Babylon's hubris"; and, "Babylon's helplessness."

Babylon's humiliation (1-7)

We start with Babylon's humiliation in 47:1-7. The two stanzas of this part are marked off by an invitation to sit. The first stanza is verses 1-4.

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| <p>1 "Come down and sit in the dust,
Sit on the ground without a throne,
For you shall no longer be called
2 "Take the millstones and grind meal.
Uncover the leg, cross the rivers.
3 "Your nakedness will be uncovered,
I will take vengeance
4 Our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts is His name,</p> | <p>O virgin daughter of Babylon;
O daughter of the Chaldeans!
tender and delicate.
Remove your veil, strip off the skirt,
Your shame also will be exposed;
and will not spare a man."
The Holy One of Israel.</p> |
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This is not primarily a prophecy of what will happen to the women of Babylon. This is a depiction of Babylon herself through the metaphor of a queen who has tumbled from the height of her throne to the lowest of lows, a slave departing into exile. She is tender and delicate because of her great wealth. She holds a privileged position. But she will sit on the ground without a throne. She will sit in the dust of shame and mourning. To take a millstone and grind meal is to do the work of a slave. To remove veil and skirt is to be stripped down like a slave. To cross the rivers is to go into exile as a slave. The uncovering of her nakedness, and the exposure of her shame depicts a wealthy woman stripped of her garments and dressed as a slave. Taken in strongest terms, that metaphor suggests the brutality of rape. Babylon will be ravished by an invading army.

And this is justice. We will find out why in the next stanza. This stanza ends not with the “why”, but with the “who.” God pours this wrath out on Babylon. And He does so in accordance with His nature. That nature is revealed in the name Isaiah declares in verse 4, “Our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel.” Consider the parts of that name. He is redeemer. That is one who buys back. Israel has been sold. God will buy them back. It is also the term used for the nearest relative who has the right and responsibility to buy back. God has a close, ongoing relationship with Israel that has not ended. She has been sold into slavery. He is kinsman-redeemer. He holds the right of redemption. His name is also, “Lord of hosts” or, “Yahweh of hosts.” Yahweh is the covenant God of Abraham and Moses. The tight connection between Israel and Yahweh. Yahweh of hosts leads a spiritual army into battle. That’s the host. Redeemer, Yahweh of hosts, and also the Holy One of Israel. His nature is holy, set apart as pure and glorious. His holiness is specifically revealed through His relationship with Israel. He is the Holy One of Israel. Hebrew temple worship sets God apart as One who cannot be depicted with an idol. There is no idol in the Hebrew Temple. The moral code, the holiness code, Leviticus 19:20, “Be holy as your God is holy.” That was intended to set Israel apart is a reflection of the Lord’s good and holy nature.

Who causes Babylon the Queen to sit in the dust? Israel’s kinsman redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, Yahweh who made covenant long ago and who leads an unconquerable host into battle. That is who will make her sit in the dust.

The next stanza provides Babylon with the reason for her humiliation.

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| <p>⁵ “Sit silently, and go into darkness,
For you will no longer be called</p> <p>⁶ “I was angry with My people,
You did not show mercy to them,</p> <p>⁷ “Yet you said, ‘I will be a queen forever.’</p> | <p>O daughter of the Chaldeans,
The queen of kingdoms.
I profaned My heritage
And gave them into your hand.
On the aged you made your yoke very heavy.
These things you did not consider
Nor remember the outcome of them.</p> |
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This stanza continues the image of Babylon as Queen. The Hebrew word can be translated literally as, “lady of kingdoms.” It doesn’t have to be, “queen of kingdoms.” But the reference to throne in the earlier stanza and Babylon’s status as an empire, as suzerain over vassal nations affirms the translation, “Queen of Kingdoms.” That’s what we’re supposed to be thinking. But she will be queen no longer. She must sit as she is told in silence, like a slave. She will be taken into darkness, forgotten.

God explains her humiliation. Babylon’s victory over Judah was fundamentally an act of God. God was judged His people for their persistent wickedness. God chose to profane Israel, His own heritage, rather than let Israel continue to degrade His name. The execution of God’s just judgment was appointed to Babylon. If God called Babylon to destroy Jerusalem, how can He now hold Babylon accountable for the destruction of Jerusalem? The short answer is that He does not. God does not find Babylon guilty of destroying Jerusalem, burning down His and carrying the Jews into exile. That was God’s plan. Babylon was His servant. For what, then, is Babylon guilty of? Two accusations are

made here. First, they are guilty for how they treated the Jews after having defeated them. “You did not show mercy to them, on the aged you made your yoke very heavy.”

But there is a second, deeper, reason God holds Babylon accountable. Babylon’s treatment of Israel is symptomatic of a heart problem. She never acknowledged God as God. She never came to see herself as subservient. She gave credit to her own power, abilities, and wisdom. She misunderstood why it was that God appointed her to judge Israel. She failed to understand the lesson of God’s discipline. If God would exile His own chosen people for their sins, what would He do to any nation that claims independence from Him and superiority over Him? Babylon failed to see that she, also, needs mercy from God. And in her not showing mercy to those captive, she shows she doesn’t imagine any need for mercy for herself.

⁷ “Yet you said, ‘I will be a queen forever.’ These things you did not consider
Nor remember the outcome of them.

Babylon did not consider that what she had done to Judah ought to also be done to her, too, if she refused submission to the true and holy Lord of hosts. Babylon’s attitude here transitions us into the second part of the poem, from Babylon’s humiliation to Babylon’s hubris.

Babylon’s hubris (8-11)

The two stanza’s calling out Babylon’s hubris are connected by the Hebrew word translated in verse 8 as, “securely”; and verse 10 as, “secure.” The stanzas are also connected by the repeated claim “You have said in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’” That is hubris. Here is the first stanza, verses 8-9.

⁸ “Now, then, hear this, you sensual one, Who dwells securely,
Who says in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me.
I will not sit as a widow, Nor know loss of children.’
⁹ “But these two things will come on you suddenly in one day:
Loss of children and widowhood. They will come on you in full measure
In spite of your many sorceries, In spite of the great power of your spells.

“Now then” indicates a connection to what has gone before. Babylon has not considered God or the consequences of her lifestyle. She is described in the first verset here as “a sensual one,” translated in different English Bibles as, “a lover of luxury”; “lover of pleasure”; “wanton creature”; “pampered one.” She loves her lifestyle of wealth and luxury. She has experienced security. She is a mighty empire, and she assumes she will continue to dwell safely. Her problem is internal. She says in her heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” That’s a direct contrast to this declaration about God that we have heard repeatedly from Isaiah, most recently in 46:9, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.” Imagine the hubris, the pride, of Babylon to claim the same for herself. Instead of believing in the sovereign uniqueness of God, she believes in the sovereign uniqueness of herself, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” She is central to her own world. The purpose of existence is to love herself. She determines her own destiny, “I will not sit as a widow, nor know loss of children.” And that is a comment about being defeated in battle. Her men will not die. There will be no widows. The young men who go into war will not be lost. There will be no loss of children.

Verse 9 directly contradicts that claim. She will lose children, and she will become a widow. The losses of military defeat. And it will happen suddenly, as if in a day. There is no self-determined security for human beings over the long run. Every nation is dependent on the will of God for continued existence. An invading force will come on Babylon. Her sorceries and spells cannot prevent it. That’s an interesting statement.

In this last line of verse 9 we are encountering a shift from the usual perspective Isaiah uses when attacking man-made religion. To this point, the nations have been characterized by dependence on false gods that cannot save. Isaiah has focused his polemic on the impotent nature of the idol-gods. They are not real gods. Now here in verse 9 he is still denouncing the same man-made religion of

Babylon, but now from the perspective of human practice. This is the science-magic-ritual behavior the Babylonians use to manipulate the gods and control their own fate.

The earlier claim in verse 8 that Babylon is “a sensual one” or “a lover of luxury” is not the same thing as calling her secular, or without concern for the spiritual. She loves the material, yes. But she is also very much concerned with the spiritual as a means of maintaining power in the material world and experiencing pleasure in the material world. Isaiah will address this as we go on. Here tells Babylon, “In spite of your many sorceries, in spite of the great power of your spells,” you will be overcome.

The second stanza in this part about Babylon’s hubris, verses 10 and 11, follows the same contrasting pattern as verses 8 and 9. Verse 10 reveals Babylon’s heart, and verse 11 reveals the consequences.

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| <p>¹⁰ “You felt secure in your wickedness and said,
Your wisdom and your knowledge,
For you have said in your heart,</p> | <p>‘No one sees me,’
they have deluded you;
‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’</p> |
| <p>¹¹ “But evil will come on you
And disaster will fall on you
And destruction about which you do not know</p> | <p>Which you will not know how to charm away;
For which you cannot atone;
Will come on you suddenly.</p> |

Babylon is not without wisdom. She has a store of knowledge in science, and engineering, and architecture, and warfare. She has a developed religion inherited from the ancient Sumerian culture. But her knowledge of the physical and spiritual world has deluded her. She denies accountability to any higher power. “No one sees me.” Again she says in her heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” That’s not a claim that she is the only kingdom that exists. It’s not a claim that there are no gods. It is a claim that she is unique. She is sovereign. No one else rises to her level. Certainly, no one stands above who might see and judge. Her gods do her bidding.

Isaiah declares this belief delusional in verse 11. Evil will come on you. You cannot charm your way out of it. You cannot atone for your sin. It will come and come suddenly. Your pride will not save you. We transitioned first from Babylon’s humiliation to Babylon’s hubris. Now we transition again to Babylon’s helplessness.

Babylon’s helplessness (12-15)

These final two stanzas are connected by a focus on Babylon’s religious experts, by a play on the words “stand” and “sit,” and by the word “save,” that appears in the last verset of each stanza. The first stanza is in 12 and 13.

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| <p>¹² “Stand fast now in your spells
Perhaps you will be able to profit,</p> | <p>And in your many sorceries
With which you have labored from your youth;
Perhaps you may cause trembling.</p> |
| <p>¹³ “You are wearied with your many counsels;
Those who predict by the new moons,</p> | <p>Let now the astrologers, those who prophesy
by the stars,
Stand up and save you from what will come
upon you.</p> |

Ancient Near Eastern generals are well known for looking for spiritual signs before engaging a battle. They took the entrails of sheep, or a crow flying across a field, or an eclipse, or a comet, or the alignment of the stars, they took it very seriously. Battles were not fought and won on the Earth. The Earth mirrored a spiritual battle among the gods of warring nations. Warfare is just a specific example of this connection between material and spiritual. Success in agriculture, trade, family, every significant human endeavor depended on a positive connection to the spiritual realm. That does not discount human endeavor. Human beings were rightly rewarded by the gods for heroism and ingenuity. Astrology is a good example of the marriage of science and spirituality. The Babylonians were famous for their charting of the stars, their science. At the same time, they charted the stars to discover and manipulate the future. Magic involves practices on Earth that manipulate gods and spiritual powers. So, science, magic, ritual – it all comes together for Babylon.

¹⁰ “You felt secure in your wickedness and said,
Your wisdom and your knowledge,
For you have said in your heart,

‘No one sees me,’
they have deluded you;
‘I am, and there is no one besides me.’

That is the heart of human kind. We can do without God. Through our own wisdom and knowledge, through our political systems, our own economic systems, our own spiritual systems, we can create our own definition and ensure our own destiny. And the more a particular kingdom or nations on Earth succeeds, the more confidence, the more pride she places in her own political, economic and religious culture.

John the Apostle understood this prophecy about Babylon. He understood that it pointed to a general principle about human society. Through the last book of the Bible John uses the metaphor of Babylon to speak about Rome, to speak about Rome’s political, economic and religious systems, because at the time of John’s writing Rome was the great, specific, historic example of the City of Man that comes into conflict with the City of God, and at that time the City of God is the Church. At the same time that Babylon served John as a metaphor for Rome, his apocalyptic description does what Isaiah’s poetry does. It elevates his vision above any one historical instance to point us toward the ongoing spiritual reality of conflict between the world and God: between the City of Man and Zion. Here is a paragraph from John that quotes Isaiah directly. This is Revelation 18:1-8. I will skip through the text to emphasize the connection to Isaiah 47.

¹ After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. ² And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! ... Come out of her, my people, so that you will not participate in her sins and receive of her plagues; ⁵ for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities... ⁷ To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, ‘I SIT AS A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, and will never see mourning.’ ⁸ For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong.

The City of Man grows confident in her successes. But all the grand systems she develops to ensure wealth and security will in a day come crumbling down. Isaiah says not only to Babylon, Isaiah says to the City of Man, to the heart of the Tower of Babel, “Stand up! Embrace your science! Embrace your spiritualism! Embrace your rituals, religious and otherwise, and see how you do! It’s all going to end in a lake of fire.” This is will not be a fire that you sit and warm yourself by. This is a fire that will consume human wickedness and sin. Self-definition and self-determination are illusions. In the end, every human advisor, guru, professor, politician, priest, will have “wandered in his own way.” You will find that, in the City of Man, “there is none to save you.”

John says, “Come out of Babylon. Come out of the City of Man. Well, that’s what’s going to happen to Israel. There is another half to this perspective of the prophecy. At the same time that Babylon falls, Israel is redeemed. Israel is released. We will consider the release in chapter 48 in our next lesson.