

## TCC Sunday 11th May 2014 – Facing the music, finding the melody – Isaiah 13-23

### **Title: “Facing the music, finding the melody”**

**Purpose:** Learning to recognise the patterns of history, the place of Babylon in the Scripture record and standing firm in the knowledge that God is totally in control.

### **Introduction**

#### Southern Sudan

Just this week Southern Sudan has been in the news because one tribe is rising up against another and there is killing and retaliation, brutality and destruction taking place on a large scale.

It is of course quite easy, sitting comfortably in our living rooms seeing a report on the BBC News to state that God is in control and that He knows all about it.

It is a very different thing if it was our brother that had his throat slit, if it was our sister that was violently raped and abused – if it was our church building that was set alight and burned to the ground with all our precious equipment inside.

#### Miroslav Volf – Croation theologian

**Miroslav Volf** is a Croation theologian and he writes about understanding suffering and injustice from his own very real background in the Serbian conflict, in his book “**Exclusion and embrace**” he writes:

“We should oppose all injustice because God does. But what if we try, and lose? What if wrong stomps on us? What can stabilize us when injustice gloats in triumph over us? If we don’t have a just God to trust in, we will have no logical reason not to become violent ourselves. It is Isaiah’s vision of God’s final justice that moderates our anger and frustration right now.

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.

We long for a true and final justice from beyond ourselves..... We wonder, is there somewhere a justice worthy of the name, or is that idea just one more of life’s mocking disappointments? Isaiah has an answer to our longings. His answer is the day of the Lord (Isaiah 13:6).”

#### Today we’re covering 11 chapters

Well, this morning we are covering 11 chapters – and the reason that we are taking together such a lengthy swathe of the Scripture, is *\*not\** because I can’t be bothered to do the hard work of preaching on

it, but simply because these chapters are one LONG UNIT – and chapter by chapter – the same general lesson is being taught and re-enforced.

11 chapters and 11 similar messages delivered to 11 different nations (of which God’s own people there in Judah – are one of them).

### The List of Nations

The list of nations include the following in the order we meet them:

- Babylon – Assyria – the Philistines – Moab – Syria then
- Ancient Ethiopia (called Cush here) – Egypt – Edom – Arabia – Judah & finally Tyre

### Q. What is the general lesson?

So – Q. What is the general theme or lesson here in these 11 chapters from chapter 13 through to 23?

Well – what we have is a series of connected ORACLES or PROPHETIC MESSAGES, that are delivered in turn to the various nations around with God’s Judgment, God’s Sovereignty and God’s Wrath being central.

One of clear lessons is that with all the nations of the world being mentioned Israel’s God is not to be looked at as some sort of merely provincial God, or local deity. God, the LORD, is the One in charge and ruling over the affairs of ALL the nations.

Now, the first of the nations mentioned, that one at the head of the list, is **the nation of Babylon**, which **leads us to our first heading**, which is:

## **1] Babylon as “Symbol”**

Now, if I had to guess which nation would head up the long list, I think I would have chosen either **Israel** (start very close to home) OR, moving a little further out, **Syria** (also called Aram or known by its chief city Damascus) OR **Assyria**, which was the rising superpower of the day.

But what we find is that it is **not any of these**, it is a nation that is only one day going to become a superpower to take over from Assyria.

In fact, the city of Babylon, was completely destroyed by the Assyrians under Sennacherib in 689BC only then to be rebuilt by his son later on.

But here Isaiah is choosing to use Babylon and all it stands for as being REPRESENTATIVE, as being TYPICAL and thoroughly CHARACTERISTIC of all the other nations.

Perhaps in a clearer way AND on a grander scale, we see in Babylon what is perhaps only in lesser or more embryonic forms things that are present in all the other nations that come under God’s just judgment.

### An oracle – “massaw”

The chapter begins with the words (Isaiah 13 verse 1) “An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of

Amoz saw:"

The word **ORACLE** is one which comes just 20 times in the OT and half of those are in fact found in our 11 chapters that we are covering this morning.

The word means “**a pronouncement**” OR “**a burden**” – and clearly these visions, these prophecies that Isaiah is bringing are not light and fluffy things – they are things of great moment – and therefore of great value to us as we read them.

Pick off a number of obvious things – Chapters 13-14

What I want to do, for a kind of first pass, is to just highlight a few things that are right there on the surface:

- FIRST thing, I’ll say is that twice, in Verse 6 and Verse 9 we have mention of “the day of the LORD” and this is a significant phrase because it only actually appears twice in Isaiah and points, I think, to a particularly significant day or operation of the LORD.

And this is an expression that goes all the way through Scripture from OT thru to the NT as well and is going to truly culminate in the time of the end when Jesus Christ comes again.

And whenever we have the day of the LORD being talked about we are being reminded who it is that is RULING and CONTROLLING and SITTING ON THE THRONE in the course of human history – and that of course is GOD. This message is expressed right there in Chapter 14 Verses 24-27 **\*\*\*READ\*\*\***

Further, whenever we hear of the day of the LORD we are also reminded that there is going to be a final, an ultimate day of the LORD.

For individuals – judgment will come to them at the ULTIMATE day of the LORD

For nations, however, their judgment, their end will be decided across the span of history, at one of many smaller days of the LORD.

- SECOND we notice that God not only has his DAY and HIS DAYS – he also **has His AGENTS, His INSTRUMENTS** that He chooses to use:

See what Verses 2&3 says: “Raise a banner on a bare hilltop, shout to them; beckon to them to enter the gates of the nobles. I have commanded my holy ones; I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath – those who rejoice in my triumph.”

Q. Who exactly are His **holy ones**?

Well very surprisingly, these “**holy ones**” are those that are specifically identified there in Verse 17

“See, I will stir up against them **the Medes...**”

God simply redirects the evil workings of a pagan and wicked regime to bring about His own infallible purposes.

A point that we do well to remember, is that here in Isaiah we are given all sorts of historical

prophecies, visions of things that God will do in the future with regard to the nations – and what we now know is that all of these have come to pass and so Isaiah is a book that should truly breed confidence in us regarding God’s word and also regarding God’s power and control over all of history.

In [Acts 17](#) – when Paul is addressing the philosophers at Athens – he has this to say: (Verse 26-28a) “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’”

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I want to go on from **#1 Babylon as “Symbol”** – (that is representative, essentially, of all other nations, all nations in all generations) – to **#2:**

## 2] Babylon as “System”

### Tracing Babylon

Let me trace for a moment the word “Babylon” in Scripture.

The root word **Babel** means “gateway to a god” and sounds like the Hebrew word “balal” which means “confusion” and perhaps you will remember that 4<sup>th</sup> great event at the start of Genesis:

- we have **the Creation** – we have **the Fall**
- we have **the Flood** and then finally we have **BABEL**, the attempt to construct a tower with its top reaching to the heavens – **a case of mankind saying to themselves, truly, the sky’s the limit!!**

The story is there in [Genesis Chapter 11](#) and **the key verse** is [Verse 4](#) which reads:

(Verse 4) “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, **so that we may make a name for ourselves** and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

Throughout Scripture we see that mankind, since God first made him in His own image – man has been taking every opportunity to repay that compliment and remake God in his own image.

And Babel was the clearest example of this CONSTANT PROJECT of all mankind to be his own master, to shape his own destiny, to be his own god!!

As verse 4 says: “so that we may make a name for ourselves...” they were not content to have the name, the very image of God upon them, to have God amongst them – no!

And all nations are on the same course – to make a name for themselves without any reference or accountability to God their Maker.

So this is where we find Babylon emerging as a CONSTRUCT, as an IDEA, yes – as a WORLD SYSTEM in

OPPOSITION to GOD.

Babylon historically

Q. Now what do we know about **Babylon historically**?

Well, I **don't want to go into a whole ton of detail – but suffice to say that** we get quite a good insight through the prophetic book of Daniel and particularly through the King of Babylon who carted away the Jews from Judah and then burned the temple and flatten the city.

**Statues – man takes up “god-like status”**

**Nebuchadnezzar** was the King around 600BC and in Daniel chapter 3 we see that he makes this great image of gold and get everyone to come to its dedication and to bow down to it.

And there is nothing particularly “ancient” about that – think of other despotic dictators and the statues they erect for themselves – recall **the toppling** of the **Saddam Hussein** statue in **Firdos Square Baghdad in 2003**.

You can look to the personality cult of the **Ruling Kim family** in **North Korea** – the golden statues that they erect of themselves (**Kim Il Sung & Kim Jong Il**) and the reverence that is expected, that is demanded.

**There is so much of man taking upon himself a “god-like status”.**

Perhaps the best passage describing this is Daniel Chapter 4 where King Nebuchadnezzar has got to the height of his power and he says these ill-advised words:

Daniel 4 verses 29-32 “the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, **“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”**

The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: **Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.**”

But Babylon and all its very human pomp and circumstance takes on this wider significance in Scripture as a CODE WORD, as an IDEA, as a WORLDVIEW SYSTEM.

NT occurrences

In the NT we find Babylon mentioned in the closing verses of the apostle Peter's first letter:

1 Peter 5 Verse 13 “She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings...”

The ESV study bible comments: “She who is at Babylon...” almost certainly refers to the church in Rome...Although the Babylon of the OT was in ruins, the reference resonates with the OT, where “Babylon” represents a center of earthly power opposed to God, and in Peter's day that city would be

Rome.”

And then as we come to the book of Revelation (that final book of the bible) we find Babylon being spoken of with the adjective GREAT.

Revelation 16 verse 19 “...God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath”.

Revelation 17 verses 1-6 “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. <sup>2</sup> With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.”

<sup>3</sup> Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. <sup>4</sup> The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. <sup>5</sup> This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY  
BABYLON THE GREAT  
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES  
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

<sup>6</sup> I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.”

The interpretation for the waters where this woman sits comes a few verses on:

“The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.”

- Just as Babylon is a SYMBOL for many different nations that all are subject to the rule and dominion and judgment of God.
- So also, Babylon is a SYSTEM, that takes many forms, but all are man-made, have man at the centre of the universe and deny God and ultimately God will judge them and bring them to nothing

Finally I want to look at one more aspect:

#1 Babylon as SYMBOL, #2 Babylon as SYSTEM

#3:

### **3] Babylon as “Slain”**

Behind all these man-made systems is the arch-enemy of God – and that is Satan himself.

We know from Paul’s writings to the church at Corinth, in [1 Corinthians 10](#), that demons are the power that operates at the back of idol worship and that is why Christians, even though they do not believe in idols, cannot enter into any close contact with idols because they have active demonic forces that operate

in the background.

And the book of Revelation makes clear that the plan of Babylon the Great is to kill and take down any who name the name of Jesus.

We should not be fooled into thinking that the ideologies and ideas of the world are just neutral, that they are just one more philosophy that is harmless. NO! Behind Babylon and every world system is SATAN himself, the accuser and adversary of all followers of Jesus.

Isaiah 14 and Verses 12-15 really do remind us and have strong echoes of Satan:

(Isaiah 14 Verse 12-15) “How you have fallen from heaven, **O morning star (this in the Latin bible – the Vulgate, is here translated LUCIFER, which has become one of a number of names for Satan)**, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! **You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.”**

#### God’s balance

Now one thing that we have been finding again and again here in Isaiah – and of course it is not only in Isaiah – is that there is a wonderful and tremendously comforting BALANCE that we find.

For every instance of judgment that we are reading about throughout all these 11 long chapters – we do also find there is some balance introduced.

And this comes in Chapter 14.

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And this comes in Isaiah Chapter 14 and Verses 1 through to 8 \*\*\* READ Isa 14v1-8\*\*\*

God’s compassion, his unfailing love are the flip-side of His righteous judgment.

God cannot and will not stand idly by in the face of all the evil that is being carried out in the world – a day of judgment is coming when the books will be opened and people will no longer be able to evade justice.

People like the Adolf Hitler’s of the world will not be able to evade what they did just by committing a simple act of suicide.

People like the prolific paedophile Jimmy Saville will not be able to evade the justice of God just by growing old and passing peacefully away.

#### Isaiah – 5<sup>th</sup> gospel

This OT book of prophecy that we are going through at this time – is one which is no stranger to the

message of the gospel – so much so, that it has in fact been called the 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel. We learn much through its many chapters of this crucial subject of salvation, of grace and of the overarching mercy of God.

#### A day of relief

As Verse 4 says there's going to be a day of relief from suffering and turmoil and cruel bondage.

There is going to be a different cry that will go up and that is “How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended!”

This cry comes up in Revelation 18 (verse 2) “With a mighty voice he shouted ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!...”

#### Like writing on the wall – encouraging

All these prophecies of Isaiah, when you look back in history have been shown to have come true.

Nations have come and then, in God's time and through his agents, they have been overtaken and taken away.

One day they look completely impregnable (rather like the Titanic – supposedly unsinkable) and then the next day they are HISTORY. As one person put it (President James Abram Garfield, 20<sup>th</sup> President in 1881) “History is the unrolled scroll of prophecy”.

Let me tie up the loose ends by way of conclusion:

## **CONCLUSION**