

The Arrogance of the Wealthy

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[0:00] We are in Isaiah chapter 23. Let me pray for us as we look at this together. Father, we want to be those who are not worldly wise, but those who have your wisdom, that we might live rightly in your world. So help us to understand now, we pray, what you have to say to us. In Jesus name. Amen.

I want to start with a music quiz this morning to get you in the set. Well, partly because it fits in with the theme, but also because it will give you a little idea what you might enjoy when you come to the harvest supper.

So I'm going to sing the first part of a song. All you need to do is to sing the next line. OK, here we go. A kiss on the cheek may be quite continental, but diamonds are a girl's best friend.

Well done. Here we go. Here's the next one. The best things in life are free, but you can give them to the birds and bees. I want money. That's what I want. Excellent. This is good. I'm impressed. What about this one?

In my dreams, I have a plan. If I got me a wealthy man, I wouldn't have to work at all. I'd fool around and have a ball.

[1:17] Money, money, money, money must be funny in a rich man's world. Well done. Three out of three. Brilliant. Well, having looked at Babylon and seen the arrogance of the powerful and Egypt and who displayed the arrogance of the worldly wise.

Today, Isaiah in this passage turns his gaze to city, a city where the culture was dominated by wealth and all that money could buy. Now, why was he doing this? He's a Jew. He's a Jewish prophet. Why is he doing this?

Well, he's doing it because Israel had set its heart on these nations instead of God. They had looked and seen these nations, cities like Tyre, the power and worldly wisdom and wealth as ways out of their difficulties.

Things that they could, places they could turn to instead of relying on the Lord. But as Isaiah was about to remind them, God was God of these nations too. So going to them was no escape.

What a bit of background. If you can picture the map of Israel in your mind coming down the Mediterranean Sea. Jerusalem is about three quarters of the way down somewhere in the middle. Tyre is about 100 miles north, but right on the coast.

[2:30] It's kind of on the edge of Lebanon around there. And over the years, Tyre had developed into a major port and trading city. Some historians think that it was so powerful, so wealthy, that it had managed to establish various other trading ports that were all linked to it around the Mediterranean.

Some even as far as Tarshish in Spain. If you remember, that's the city where Jonah was running off to, to get away from God as far as he could. We know how that turned out. Well, Tyre was a trading port.

It traded wheat from Egypt, wood from Lebanon and anything from anywhere. And it had made itself incredibly wealthy. And of course, wealth creation does certain things, doesn't it?

It had made others wealthy as well. Verse 5, Tyre was a great place to invest and do business. If you had some money, you made more money. If you had a lot of money, you made a lot more money.

The wealth made the wealthy powerful. Well, verse 8 speaks of Tyre making people kings and princes. Well, that's kind of true today, really, isn't it? The richest people in our world today may not have the title of a president or a prime minister or a king, but they often wield far more power than those who do.

[3 : 44] And of course, all that wealth gave the wealthy pleasure. I'll leave it to your imagination. What kind of pleasures Tyre had offered, they won't be surprising. They're still the same today. The wealth of Tyre made others wealthy.

Wealth made the wealthy powerful. And that wealth gave the wealthy pleasure. However, wealth like that can very often make people feel untouchable, secure, sorted and very, very proud.

If you want it, you can buy it. If you're in trouble, well, you could buy your way out of it. And the trouble is that pride like that leaves no place for God.

And sadly, Israel looked at Tyre's wealth and influence and they wanted it for themselves. And over many decades and through alliances and business arrangements, God's people had slowly come under the evil influence of Tyre.

And they had started to turn eventually to the worship of Tyre's gods, the worship of money and Baal and all the other things. Now, whenever we put our trust in something or someone else that takes God's place, it's very easy to begin to compromise, to change our minds on our morals, to make deals, to open the door for wickedness and for vice to flow back the other way.

[5 : 04] That's why the scriptures often warn God's people, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, about the dangers of wealth and being financially secure so much that we don't need to rely on God.

So think of the warnings that Moses gave to God's people before they entered the promised land. Be careful when you're settled and you've got everything, because then your hearts will turn away from me, Moses warned them.

Think of Solomon, king with amazing wisdom, but with so much wealth that he started to become unwise in what he did. And of course, Jesus says a lot about money, as do the apostles as well. But these are lessons that God's people across the ages have been very slow to learn. Those of you that like history will not have heard of Charlemagne, Charles the Great, the great emperor of Europe.

He was emperor over a vast empire covering most of West and Central Europe in the 8th and early 9th centuries. He died on the 28th of January 814, sorry, 814.

[6 : 08] Earlier than that, 814. He was given a lavish burial. And when his tomb was opened 200 years later by King Otto III, they found Charlemagne embalmed, sat on a glorious golden throne with his crown still on his bony head and with a Bible open on his lap.

And one finger pointed down to Mark chapter 8, verse 36. Seemingly making a point that the emperor had never really learned.

I wonder if you can work out what that verse might be. This is what it says. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Charlemagne had everything.

Did he learn that lesson? We don't know. Well, Tyrian needed to learn that lesson, as did Israel. I wonder if we do as well. Are we more attracted to money and all that it can provide than we are dedicated to God and reliant on his provision?

Great wealth and all that it can buy might open doors to great worldly pleasures, might give us a sense of security and peace, but all the riches of this world are no use for us when we come to God's judgment and the next life begins.

[7 : 26] And as Christians, we need to keep that final day in mind, don't we? All of us will one day face God's capital J judgment, and we can be sure that on that day, we won't be able to slip to the side to St. Peter and say, look, if I just make a big donation to the upkeep of heaven, can I get in, please?

It won't work like that. We need to be born again through faith in Christ. That capital J judgment should loom in our minds. But as Tyre is about to find out, through times and in history, God uses little j judgments to bring people to their senses, as Tyre was about to discover.

So verse 9, this judgment that we read about in those first eight verses, the Lord Almighty planned it, to bring her down in all her splendor and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.

Tyre said, I don't need God, I've got all this wealth. God said, ah, ha, ha, you got that the wrong way around. And what's the effect as God's judgment falls, as it did through the conquest by the Assyrian Empire?

Well, all of a sudden, their wealth was taken away. And when their wealth went, where their revelry ceased, verse 12, their pleasures were curtailed, their joy and pleasure were replaced by fear and loss, and they soon found that wherever they went, there was no place where they could find true

rest.

[8 : 46] And those things are true, spiritually speaking as well, for all those without hope in Jesus. Without Jesus, this life is as good as things will ever get.

Outside of Christ, there is no eternal hope, there is no deep peace, there is no lasting joy and pleasure, because all of those things, including all the money we amass, will leave in this world. There is no eternal hope, definitely no eternal rest outside of Jesus. But for the believer, well, what a difference Jesus makes. He is the bread of life that satisfies our aching hearts. He is the water of life, a spring that wells up to eternal life. Jesus comes and offers us peace that the world cannot give, and a certain hope that even suffering or poverty or even death cannot take away.

And whether or not we have wealth or comfort in this life, God's promises we can be certain will be fulfilled beyond our imagination in the next.

[9 : 48] If we're honest, it's sometimes hard to think that way, especially when all of us are surrounded by so much. It's easy to equate comfort and wealth with happiness, and to fret about our finances and seek to hold on to them so tightly, because we think that if we lose those material possessions, well, there won't be any joy or peace left for us.

But of course, that isn't the case. So often our fretting is because of what we have. About 25 years ago, I spent a few weeks of the school summer holiday in Uganda.

A group of us travelled out to spend some time with the teaching staff of an orphanage just outside Kampala. It was originally set up for the orphans after Idi Amin's brutal regime.

It was now packed with AIDS orphans. They had almost no possessions. They had absolutely no money. And yet they were some of the most content, happy young people I have ever met.

See, they knew that God loved them. And that he loved them deeply. They knew that God would continue to provide for them, as he had already by bringing them into this school. And that gave these young children deep joy and great pleasure in everything that they did have.

[11 : 11] In everything that they did have, not in what they didn't. Who are we most like, I wonder? Who would we most like to be like? Do we spend our time dreaming of winning the lottery so that, like the citizens of Tyre, we can enjoy all the pleasures of the world and gain entry into the places of power and influence?

Or we prefer the contentment of those young Ugandan Christians with very little worldly wealth and absolutely no power or influence at all. And yet through their trust in Jesus, they had such a joy and a peace that it honestly made you want to weep, as you've got to know them.

Tyre let their wealth go to their heads. And they became proud, and they became proud and arrogant because of it. That's a challenge for us too, I think. As we reflect on how we relate to our wealth.

Of course, that isn't the whole story, is it? While the Bible says a lot about the love of money and warns us never to crave or rely on our wealth, the Bible never turns around and says that money is evil and you should get rid of all of it.

That badly quoted verse from 1 Timothy 6 actually says that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Because there is no kind of evil to which the love of money may not lead people if they let it control their lives.

[12 : 34] But in and of itself, wealth and riches are not evil. In fact, like everything else that we have, they are gifts from God that we can and we should be using for his glory. And so as he had done with Egypt, God in his mercy gave Tyre a second chance.

That's what verses 15 to 18 are all about. Tyre had 70 years of devastation and desolation, but verse 16 calls for a song of remembrance. And verse 17 for a return to trade.

It's curious there that Tyre's business is called prostitution, not because I don't think it was reliant literally on the sex trade, but because of the dangers involved in seeking financial gain.

You have to kind of give yourself over to make those kind of profits. But this time, verse 18, all the profits and the efforts from Tyre's business aren't going on ungodly pleasures.

They're flowing towards God and his work. See, poverty is not a blessed state that all Christians should seek out. Only I could give everything away then I would be truly blessed.

[13 : 40] No, the Bible often describes the poor as blessed, not because they have nothing, but because Jesus says in Mark chapter 10 that it is so hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Because if you've got everything in this world, you never think about the next. But if God has blessed us with material wealth, and all of us here will be somewhere in the top 5% of the wealthiest people on earth at the moment, that's an interesting thought, isn't it?

Well, we have a responsibility, as Tyre did in its new life, to use what we have for God's glory and the advancement of God's kingdom in us and those around us.

And that's what Tyre would begin to do. In the previous life, Tyre had taken God out of the picture. They'd grown arrogant and self-centered, self-indulgent. But they had experienced God's judgments and had been given a second chance.

Maybe that's the good news we need to hear today. Maybe as we look back over our lives, we can see that our wealth has made us a little like the people of Tyre, rather self-centered, maybe a little arrogant, not to mention sometimes ungrateful and maybe ungenerous as we wanted to hold on to things.

[14 : 56] But with God, every day is a day of possibility of salvation. Every moment, a chance to acknowledge our sin and repent and turn from those things and live differently as Tyre began to.

So as I close, let me end with a couple of questions to ponder as you go through this week. Is our hope and our security really grounded in God or in the things that God has given us?

Is our hope grounded in God or the things that God has given us? And which of those would we prefer to lose? And here's the second question.

If our hope truly is in God, how do we live that out? Is it seen in our giving how much the percentage of our disposable income that we give to God's work?

Or if we're at a place in life where actually we have very little disposable income now, is it seen in how our estate will be divided up after our death? How are we using, shepherding, applying the gifts that God has given?

[16 : 04] Well, the people of Tyre wanted a great earthly kingdom and all the pleasures money could buy. But as followers of Jesus, the one who gave up all things for us, the one who left the glory of heaven behind and came to earth to be a servant for all, we know, don't we, that ultimately our greatest treasure is in heaven.

And as God's humble servants, may we live those humble and generous lives, grateful for all that God has given us and with our true hope and security, not based on the things that we have, but on Jesus and all that he has done for us.

Well, may God bless us as we wrestle with these questions. Amen.