

The Arrogance of the Powerful

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- [0 : 0 0] Do keep that passage open. Let's pray as we come to God's word today. Heavenly Father, we've sung our prayer that you would speak to us.
- So hear our prayer now, we pray. And as we look at your word together, would you help us to understand it, to know how it might change our thinking and our behaviour.
- That we would know that you are Lord of all, the world out there and our lives within. In Jesus' name. Amen. The arrogance of the powerful. That's where we're going today.
- I don't know whether you saw it in the news, but China held its largest ever military parade last week. As well as hypersonic nuclear missiles. I didn't even know those things existed.
- The display also featured aerial and huge submarine drones, robot wolves capable of supporting soldiers in the field and advanced fighter aircraft.
- [1 : 0 6] The message was clear that it sent to the world, especially the message it was sending to the USA. Don't mess with us. We're stronger than you. We will do what we want. And you can't stop us.
- And what made the threat larger was that alongside the Chinese premier stood the presidents of Russia, North Korea and Iran to name three other friendly nations. It's clear how China wants its neighbours and those of us who live in the West to feel about this.
- They want us to feel frightened and daunted and rather helpless to resist. Now, as Israel looked around its part of the world in the seventh century before Jesus, that was how they felt when they looked out and they saw the mighty three superpowers of their day.
- Egypt was to the south. Assyria was to the north. Babylon was to the east. And there was Israel set in a fertile land at the centre of all the ancient highways with a Mediterranean Sea to the west.
- And all these great empires looked on Israel with great envy and desire. Of course, Israel had once been a huge, powerful nation itself under David and Solomon.
- [2 : 1 9] But since then, the country had been fractured into two parts. They had grown militarily and economically and spiritually weak. There was no way they could win a war on their own against any of these nations.
- So they had to make costly alliances, buying them off with tributes and huge bribes. But despite their weakness and their vulnerability, God's people had still not turned back to God for help.
- Isaiah had been telling them that in the first 12 chapters of his book. The sin and rebellion against the Lord were the cause of their troubles. And their sin would continue to weaken them unless they repented.
- And if they didn't, God would eventually throw them out of their lands. Now, Isaiah in his great book does offer them some wonderful hope. He speaks of the hope of restoration and bringing them back after they had been thrown out.
- And of course, he speaks a lot about the glorious promise of a Messiah. But those days were a long way in the distance. Right now, they had these threats around them. And these other nations were stronger and richer, seemingly wiser than they were.

[3 : 28] All they had was their religion. And they weren't trusting in God much. And so from their perspective, their faith wasn't doing them much good. What hope did they have?

Where was God in all this? Why wasn't he stepping in? Well, today and over the next three weeks, we'll be taking a dive into chapters 13 to 35.

And see God's verdict on those nations that are threatening his people and who would eventually attack him. And whilst all these events are ancient history, I hope that you'll see as we go through that there are wonderful words of hope for us here that can help us stand firm in Christ, even as the world of our age becomes far less stable.

But as with all of scripture, of course, there are challenges for us too. The sins of the nations, their arrogance towards God and other peoples because of their power, their wealth, their wisdom, their religion, are all traps that we can fall into ourselves, albeit on a far smaller level.

So I hope you're prepared this morning to have your thinking about the world challenged as we work our way through these chapters. And that you're prepared too for God to point his finger into your heart, your behaviour, your attitudes.

[4 : 49] As we see that the things that are going on out there might also be going on in here. Now that's a longer introduction than normal, but it's a new section. So let me tell you where we're going today.

We're going to start on the grandest level and narrow things down. OK? So we're going to begin by seeing that in this passage, we have a reminder of God's great and final judgment on all nations.

That comes through in this passage. Secondly, we're going to look at God's judgment on Babylon, this one nation, specifically for their arrogance and their trust in their power and might.

And then we'll find God's challenge to us about how we use the power and influence that we have in our own lives. So let's start with on the grandest scale, a reminder of God's great and final judgment on all nations and all peoples.

One of the great comforts we have as Christians is the knowledge that one day true justice will be done and God's kingdom will come and he will reign in perfect righteousness.

[5 : 56] That isn't what our world is like now, is it? In our world, seemingly the rich and the powerful, the well-connected seem to get away with anything. The poor and the weak, the unconnected, the unknown, well, they often feel the full force of the law.

But when those ruling elites break the law, well, the laws are bent. That sentence is a change. Mitigation is given so that the laws don't really apply to them. And if that's true in our own nation, which has a strong history of the rule of law and justice for all, how much more is it the case in the nations out there, the rest of the world, where even the very idea of there being an absolute right and wrong are reworked so they mean whatever the people in power want them to mean.

So how often do we see evil nations seeming to flourish with no comeback? How often do we see even rulers or dictators, when their power finally falls, well, they just escape and go to another nation with all their own nation's money in their suitcases?

How often do we see terrorists flee from one place and find a safe sanctuary somewhere else when their cover is blown? How often do we read of drug lords living lives of luxury?

Or see celebrity criminals evade justice? But Isaiah reminds us that that situation will not last forever. Those who commit atrocities and war crimes, those who oppress and exploit the weak, those who somehow evade justice in this life will not do so forever.

[7 : 36] That's where Isaiah starts in chapter 13. It looks as if all these words are about Babylon and God's judgment on that nation. But as you read it through, you see, actually, this can't just be Babylon.

This is a bigger theme going on here. Isaiah starts on the grandest scale with a reminder that however powerful a nation or ruler might be, however mighty in battle they are, however rich, however famous, self-assured, confident and secure they seem to be, none of that will eventually make any difference.

None of that counts for anything in the final court of almighty God. So these verses at the start of chapter 13 describe the day of the Lord. It's a day of war and destruction as the nations of the world are in uproar, fighting both against each other and against God.

It's a day, as Isaiah explains, that there will be no escape for sinners, a day so calamitous that even the stars on the planets will be shaken. Jesus speaks of this day in Matthew's gospel.

The apostle John points to it in the book of Revelation. Isaiah describes it like this in verse 11. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

[8 : 54] A day when, verse 13, God will make the heavens tremble and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the Lord Almighty in the day of his burning anger.

This is that great final day of judgment. For those outside of God's kingdom, for those who don't yet know Jesus as his saviour, this day will be terrifying because it's a day when all hope comes to an end.

But for those who know Jesus, who know that despite their sin and failure, they have received God's grace and mercy, who are longing for this day of justice.

Well, this is a glorious day. This is a day full of hope. A day of righteous destruction and perfect, just judgment. It's the clearing away of everything evil before God reveals the new heavens and the new earth in all their glorious perfection.

This day is coming. So how does that help us? How does that help us? Well, what did we sing a few moments ago? Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, but the Lord doesn't change at all.

[10 : 05] Friends, as a reminder of this great and final day of judgment, encourages us with the truth that God is in control of all of history. That it's all leading to the place where he wants it to go.

That his power is ultimate. That his will is always done. Gloriously, our God is a God of justice and righteousness, who will one day call the evil to account.

That is a good thing. And when you see evil in the world, you will know that it will not last. Let that encourage your heart today. When you see empires rise, do not fear.

When you see injustice increase, don't give in to despair. Hold on to hope, because one day all evil will be destroyed. And however unlikely it seems now, it's only a matter of time.

It's only a matter of time. Firstly, then, that reminder of God's great and final judgment on all nations. Secondly, God's judgment on Babylon, specifically for their arrogance and trust in their own power and might.

[11 : 16] At the end of chapter 13, from verses 17 onwards, tell us about this sudden and comprehensive punishment that God's judgment would bring on the nation and empire of Babylon long before that final judgment.

The means of God's bringing them to justice will be another nation. Verse 17, it will be the Medes. At the time Isaiah is writing, there are people growing in power, but there are no means a mighty empire at this point.

But God is going to raise them up so that they can deal with Babylon. Verse 19 tells us that the implementation of God's judgment is going to be sudden. Their fall from power would almost come in an instant.

As dramatic, if you remember the story from the book of Genesis, of God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. You can read Daniel chapter 5 tells you that the kings of Babylon are celebrating when that night their empire fell, almost without warning.

The consequences though will be severe. The Medes knew nothing about compassion. Babylon itself hadn't either.

[12 : 27] They were a ruthless bunch. And so as their nation falls, they would experience what they had meted out. From the youngest to the oldest, verse 18, God's judgment would eventually leave the country.

So devastated it would be uninhabited throughout the generations. And there was no way out for them. Unlike other nations, the Medes couldn't be bought off with silver or gold.

Verse 17, and God's judgment was on its way. It would not delay, verse 22. Now, of course, there are no perfect nations in this world because there are no perfect people.

So why was God singling out Babylon, especially when they were the nation that God had raised up to punish his own people for their own wickedness? Well, if you flick on through to chapter 14, you find the answer.

The Babylonians were ruthless, greedy, cruel. Their long list of sins of many, which are referred to in verses 5 and 6, would have been extensive. But in these verses, God shows us that the root cause of their sin and wickedness was their pride and arrogance.

[13 : 40] Their pride and arrogance. So chapter 4, verse 13, You said in your heart, I will ascend to the heavens. I will raise my throne above the stars of God. I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly at the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.

I will ascend above the tops of the clouds. I will make myself like the most high. Their great military might have made their whole nation arrogant.

They thought they had more power than God, that they deserved to be higher than God, getting the glory that God deserved. Such arrogance was rooted in their power. They knew that they were stronger, faster, fitter, fiercer than all their adversaries.

Therefore, they imagined that they could do whatever they liked, and no one had the strength nor the right to stop them. You see, when people in power start to think like that, terrible things happen.

Freedom of speech ends. Freedom of belief and movement is constrained. Freedom to choose your job, your home, your spouse disappears. Under that kind of power, with that kind of dominant leadership, you do what you are told or you face the consequences.

[14 : 56] And there's no recourse to the law because the state is the law. They make the law so the weak get crushed. Those on the edges are rubbed out. Those who don't fit in are cast aside.

Those who have something the state wants, well, they get used and abused until their usefulness is gone. And if people look as if they're a problem to the state, well, the state will just rub them out.

Deal with them in any way they wish. And of course, if you think you are higher than God, if you think you are God, then there is no still small voice in your head calling you to stop and to think again, to halt, to change.

The only voice you hear is your own, isn't it? If you think you are God's. So arrogance becomes a gateway sin to so many more sins and to so much wickedness because it removes that handbrake that our conscience provides when we remember that ultimately God is in charge and he sets the rules.

So when the Babylonians came into Judah and attacked Jerusalem, they showed no mercy. They were ruthless. Well, why would they show mercy? They were the powerful ones.

[16 : 11] They were God. But they were wrong. They were wrong. They weren't all powerful. God was. They didn't get to decide right from wrong.

That was God's call. And however strong they thought they were, God was far, far stronger. And in his own time, as Isaiah explains here and prophecies here, God will bring them low and call them to account for their wickedness and arrogance.

Now, none of this meant that Israel and Judah would avoid what was coming to them for their own disobedience and sin. But there was some comfort here, some ground of comfort here that those who would be God's agents in punishing them would also be held to account.

See, not even the strongest nations or greatest empires can avoid the just judgment of God. God's laws apply to all. I wonder if you see some of the implications for us living in this broken world.

See, when we face unjust hatred or suffer injustice, we're reminded that God does see. That one day in his time, God's justice will come on the wicked.

[17 : 26] It will certainly be there in the judgment at the end of time. We've seen that already. But this section reminds us that even in this world now, we will see times when God judges the unrighteous and holds them to account.

Just think back over our lives. The number of times kingdoms have risen and kingdoms have fallen. The enemies that have been there, think of the people we feared 30 years ago or 80 years ago.

You know, the Nazi empire is longer. Mussolini has been defeated. 30 years ago, we were all hiding from the IRA and worried about those terrorist attacks. They're disbanded now.

Yes, there are new threats. But in the end, all empires and despots end up in the same way. The grave opens up for them. There is no glory to be had there.

So when we get concerned over the state of the world or the injustice of the nations or the corporate greed of big business or the wicked influence of social media giants, let's hold on to these two encouraging truths.

[18 : 34] One day a final judgment is coming and everyone will be held to account. And in the meantime, God still acts in history to call even the most powerful nations and people to account for their arrogant wickedness.

You will have seen that in your own lives. God is still at work. Here's the third challenge. This is where it gets personal. See, compared to the leaders of nations and corporations, you and I have very little power.

But many of us, through our work or position in our families, maybe through our education or wealth or talent or indeed because of our physical strength, will have some kind of power or influence over others.

As the rector of the parishes, I have power and influence over the churches and some influence, at least, over the congregations. It just comes with the job.

If you're a parent or grandparent, I know it may not feel like it very often, but you do have a certain amount of influence over your children and grandchildren. You might be in a position at work where, because of your job, you have people who sit under your authority.

[19 : 48] It might be true where you live. Maybe you've lived there for a long time. Your neighbours look up to you as someone who knows how things work. And there's nothing at all wrong with having power and authority.

Those are God-given gifts and opportunities. And actually, our church, our family, our society would crumble into disarray if those things weren't there. But as that great modern philosopher, Spider-Man's uncle put it, with great power comes great responsibility.

And if we begin to feel, like some of these leaders of the nations feel, that our power or position is our divine right, that those who we sit over are there to serve us, that the trappings of power are exactly what we deserve, then we are walking the Babylonian road to judgment.

Because the arrogance of our power will take us further and further away from God. And don't think that this can't apply in the church, because of course it does.

And it began very early, didn't it? You remember James and John coming to Jesus secretly and saying, there's a kingdom coming, we'd like the best seats, please. Give us more authority than the rest of this rabble.

[21 : 07] That greed, that hunger for power was there then. And we've seen it in the church today. Things have hit the headlines over the last couple of weeks, churches in Sheffield, where someone who had a great deal of power misused that power.

It led to broken lives and a broken church. And it's not just in Sheffield, there have been a big church in Watford, in London, lots of different churches up and down the country, facing the same thing.

Those who had the power forgot that they had been given that power for the glory of God and for the blessing of those Jesus came to save. But the arrogance of power can start to show itself in very ordinary ways, very little ways, sometimes just in our attitudes and then in our behaviour to those around us.

I don't know whether you recognise these in yourself, that wanting to set the agenda, to make all the decisions, to get control of everything that gets done. In judging others by different standards than the ones you hold yourselves to.

Giving yourself a bit of extra leeway than you do to that person over there. In excusing our own sin and allowing the ends to justify the means. In thinking that we're always right.

[22 : 30] Holding those who disagree with us in contempt. By refusing to listen or accept responsibility or apologise when we know we're in the wrong. And imagining that somehow since God has placed us where we are, we can now do exactly as we like.

Do you see any signs of those in your life in the way you treat the people around you? How you relate to others at home or at work or in church? If so, remember the warnings that we have here.

Remember the word of scripture. God humbles the proud. Wonderfully, scripture doesn't just diagnose our problems. It also gives us a solution.

See, there is one who had divine power and authority but who did not consider that gave him the right to take his father's throne. Instead, the glorious, eternal son of God humbled himself and entered our world as a baby.

He went further still taking on the role of a servant and served us in the way we needed most by submitting himself to death on the cross. In Jesus, we have the antidote to this kind of arrogance of power.

[23 : 50] It's a humble servant leadership. Jesus is our model for how we would use whatever power we have been given. We need to use it to serve others and to bring God glory, not for ourselves.

Jesus is the example we need to follow. But more than that, Jesus is the death, is the means by which our misuse of power, our arrogance over our positions can be dealt with.

Because on the cross, all of God's wrath was poured out on Christ and his blood can wash even the most wicked sinner clean. The antidote to power is seen in Jesus.

It's very easy to point the finger at China or Russia or the USA or whoever is in your personal crosshairs and name their sins and say, that is wicked. Their power has made them arrogant.

They need to be stopped. Well, wonderfully, one day God will call them to account. We can be sure of that. But what about us? How do these sins entangle us too?

[24 : 57] May God help us to see ourselves rightly so that we might seek his forgiveness and his power to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.