

The Lord Of Nations

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[0 : 0 0] Our God and Father, grant that as we are gathered to partake of the Holy Communion, as we have the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, not as our achievement but as Your gift, that we may hear Your Word, and in the particular circumstance of each of our lives, we may be given grace to understand it and obey it.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. The text for this morning is taken from Isaiah chapters 12 and 13, 1 to 8, and you have already found it, so I presume you can again.

I'm treating it in this way, that it really is a tale of two cities. In chapter 13, there is the city of Babylon, and in chapter 12, and I'm going to do them in that order, it's the city of Zion.

And I would like just to remind you as we begin that we all belong to a city, and this city largely shapes our understanding.

The city is the place where we create God in our own image. We take over the world that God is running and show that we can run it rather better, because He's not doing a good job.

[1 : 5 1] We use tremendous energy, tremendous creativity, and I mean, I put in that line because I read the Saturday Sun yesterday.

And the amount of energy and creativity that goes into the life of a city is quite amazing, in art and music and sports and all the things that happen.

A city is probably humanity's greatest invention. You know, of all the things that humanity has invented, cities are probably the most complex and greatest invention, and there are great cities that mark the history of humanity.

Cities are different. We all know that Detroit is different than Vancouver. Vancouver is different than Victoria. Victoria is different than Chicago.

New York is different than Boston. And Las Vegas is different than them all. All these are cities and they have a kind of spiritual essence about them.

[3 : 0 1] And the people that live in the city tend to belong to the city and pick up the values of the city, and are shaped by the city.

I came across a brilliant quotation in the press, which I'm anxious to pass on to you this week, which I thought was good. It was talking about the Republican Party and the states and how politics, which is the government of the city, but it talks about the Republican Party and it says this about it.

Successful parties create. You know something's coming up because biblically-minded people know that only God creates.

But it says successful parties create. All we do, in fact, is shuffle the deck. We can't. We can't create.

The successful parties create their own monsters. Reaganomics helped create a mass upper middle class, a national culture of childless yuppies who want gay rights, bike trails, and smoke-free restaurants.

[4 : 21] That's the dominant force in the life of the city right now is these people. And to go against any of those things is, in a sense, to be in rebellion against the city to which you belong.

Well, the two cities of which I want to speak are Jerusalem and or Zion.

And when you're reading Isaiah, when he talks about the mountain, when he talks about Zion, when he talks about the city, when he talks about Jerusalem, he's always referring to the city of God in the midst of which is geographically for him, Jerusalem.

But first let me talk to you about the city of Babylon. Now, Babylon has bad press from Genesis to Revelation. In Genesis, it's described as the corporate result of a group of people saying, Come, let us make for 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 earth.

So that Babylon is, in fact, the first and great city of arrogant self-sufficiency.

[5 : 57] And they deliberately set out to build it that way. The Sun last night told about a gentleman who's building a city in which greed will be the great motivating factor for everybody to come and join them.

Well, Herodotus, who's an ancient historian from almost back to the time of Isaiah, describes Babylon.

You should listen to this description to get a picture in your mind of the city we're talking about. The city stands on a broad plain, is an exact square, 120 furlongs, that's 15 miles each way.

It is surrounded in the first place by a broad and deep moat full of water, behind which rises a wall.

The wall is 80 feet thick and 200 feet high. It has 100 gates of brass by which you can enter the city.

[7 : 11] It's divided by the river Euphrates, which flows through it and provides water for it. And in the center of it is the great ziggurat temple, which goes up so that they can, in a sense, challenge the gods.

And the top of the ziggurat is the place where the gods come and have intercourse with the priests and priestesses of Babylon.

So you have a very powerful picture of a city portrayed. And it's not surprising that when you get to the last book in the Bible, Revelation, that the very simple description of Babylon is the great whore.

And it gives reason for thinking that if you want to read chapter 18 of Revelation. So Babylon is also the city to which the exiles went in the time of Jeremiah.

And Jeremiah told the exiles in the city to seek the welfare of the city while they were there as exiles. Babylon was, after Isaiah's time and before Jeremiah's time, was crushed by Sennacherib, who tore the place apart completely.

[8 : 36] So that when you get to chapter 13, verse 1 of Isaiah, you have the first of Isaiah's oracles.

The first of ten that follow between chapter 13 and chapter 23. These oracles are probably what stop you in your tracks if you sit down to read Isaiah.

It just goes on and on and on. And the confusion becomes greater. And you just, it's hard to get through. One of the things that David Short must do before he gives up on this series on Isaiah is provide us all, I think, with a little page of paper telling us how to read Isaiah.

Because sitting down and doing it cover to cover is more than most people can handle. So this is the first of the oracles.

And it's addressed to the city of Babylon. Subsequent ones are addressed to the Philistines, to Moab, to Damascus, to Cush, to Egypt, and to Arabia.

[9 : 46] So if you look, you look at the city, and in chapter 13, if you want to look there now, you'll find this about it.

First there is the oracle. It's seen by Amos. And the first picture he has is a banner being raised on a bare hill.

So it's almost like Vancouver, as if you could see the barbarians gathering on Grouse Mountain and looking down on this city of Vancouver.

And seeing the wealth and the luxury and the affluence and all the wonders of the city, which to their barbarian minds are so great.

And their covetousness and their desire for the barbarians to break into this gracious city. is the situation that Babylon was in.

[10 : 48] And a banner was raised to rally the forces and to get them to capture this wealthy city. It must be somewhat similar to the way the two-thirds world looks at the United States of America, particularly when they're provided with videos and television to watch the glamorous life of them.

And they gather, and they couldn't help but be covetous and want to do it. And why on earth Ethiopia and Eritrea are bombing each other?

And why India and Pakistan are building atomic bombs? Somehow, I suppose, that's the way to become like America. I don't know. But it's a very strange thing.

But here is Babylon. And Babylon is, as I am going to show you, it's the city of fear. Fear is the great motivating factor.

And the fear, whether real or just inevitable, is the gathering of the barbarians around the city to somehow break into this massive, wealthy, affluent place and to spoil it.

[12 : 06] So that's what happens in chapter 13 and verses 2 following. They are to gather under leaders. But then in verse 3 it says, I have commanded.

In the NIV it says, My holy ones. It's not quite the same in your text. But it means the ones who are committed to my cause and holy because God has taken them to be the instrument of his purpose.

So that you get this contradiction if you want. But you see, the gathering of the barbarians are serving the purpose of God.

And Hosea says, And Hosea says that God refers to them as his holy ones because they're going to do for Babylon what inevitably must be done.

And so he says, And so he says, I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath. Those who are gathering will rejoice in my triumph, which will be the triumph of the barbarians over the city.

[13 : 28] And so he says, You see, You see, What's developing here is that this city of Babylon has put itself in the position where by reason of its way of life, it can know nothing of God save his wrath.

And lots of people know nothing of God save his wrath. They know the anger of God towards them, and they return the compliment by being very angry with God.

And the only way that God can communicate with them in the arrogance of their self-sufficiency is by the instrument of his wrath.

And the instrument of his wrath is the gathering of the barbarians, as you will see from the ends of the earth. And he says to the people of that city, Listen.

And they can hear, almost in the distance, they can hear the drums of fear are beating, you know. Just like in the community of Vancouver, we can hear the drums of fear, you know.

- [14 : 43] We watch the stock exchange. We wait for the earthquake. We think this can't continue. We, everybody, fear is something we buy enormous insurance policies, all motivated by fear.

And one of the pervasive realities of the city is motivated by fear. Fear of what immigration will do to our city. Fear of what malpractices of various kinds will do to our city.

So they are to listen. And as they listen, they will hear this noise on the mountains, like a great multitude. An uproar among the kingdoms, it says.

They will hear the nations gathering together. Because of their enormous wealth and power and arrogance and self-sufficiency, the barbarians are moving in on them.

To be, as it were, the instrument of God's wrath. So that in verse 4, you see that the Lord Almighty is mustering an army for war.

- [15 : 51] They come from faraway lands, from remote places beyond the edges of civilization, from the ends of the heavens. They gather like vultures around the city of Babylon.

And it concludes in verse 5, the Lord, the weapons of his wrath to destroy the whole country. So you can see this gathering.

You can see what's happening. But then in verse 6, it says, Wail, for the day of the Lord is near. And this isn't a day of fulfillment.

This is a day of utter destruction. That day will come, it says, by destruction from the Almighty. And then the interesting thing is that this section that we read ends with the recognition that the real enemy is not the hordes of barbarians that are gathered on the hill outside the city of Babylon.

The destruction of the city comes from the hearts of the people of the city. That's their great enemy. And that's what ultimately destroys them.

- [17 : 10] It's not what comes from outside. It's what comes from inside. And verse 7 describes this. That hands go limp. Hearts melt.

Imagined terrors seize them. Pain and anguish. That is, that what we call psychosomatic pains caused by fear.

Like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other. Their faces aflame.

The, the, uh. They know the, the, the wrath of an angry God. And fear takes over them.

So that in spite of the fact that they have a huge military capability. They have walls 200 feet high. They have a moat.

- [18 : 13] And they have every possible way of, of doing it. Looking after themselves. Nevertheless, the enemy from within means that their hands go limp. Their hearts melt.

Terror freezes them in their tracks. Pain and anguish assail them. And, uh, they ride in labor. And they look at each other.

And they look at each other with shame on their faces. Because they know that they have consciously and deliberately put their trust in the wrong thing.

In the wrong person. The Vancouver Sun quoted last week a statement which says, Capitalism is not a philosophy.

It's merely a tool. It is utterly and ruthlessly immoral. It cares for nothing but efficiency. It is a jealous God.

- [19 : 14] It is the implacable enemy of inefficient institutions that solicit rival loyalties. The earth, the family, the community, religion, and the nation state.

They're too inefficient for capitalism. Well, you see how, what, what he's saying about Babylon is that they have put their trust in the wrong thing.

They have put their trust in the wrong person. They have put their trust in the wrong, in, in, in that which can only attract the wrath of God.

That's, that's how the world works. And, uh, that's what they have done. Now I want you to turn to the other city, which is the city of, of Zion.

And the city of Zion is spoken of in chapter 12. Uh, and if you look at it, you will see that the day of destruction that comes to Babylon, there's also a day that comes to Zion or to Jerusalem, to the, to the mountain.

[20 : 27] And it says, it says there that in the first verse, and that day the praise of the Lord shall dominate. Now the praise of the Lord is from a biblical perspective, the essential purpose of our humanity, to give praise to God.

That's, that's what is there to be done. It says, secondly, that God's anger has turned away. Instead of God's wrath being visited on them, God's love, God's wrath has been turned away.

You know, as, as I go around and talk to people about God, most people are angry at God. And most people have developed, uh, so probably some good arguments as to why they should be angry with God.

And the thing that they need, that we all need to be aware of is that while we may be very angry with God, God has also got reason to be angry with us. And that for anything to happen, that this anger has to be turned away.

And so it says, the praise of the Lord, the Lord's anger is turned away, uh, and his comfort is given.

[21 : 44] And comfort means to make strong. So you see the contrast between, in Babylon, hands hang, limb, hearts melt, terror seizes people, as they see the wrath of God.

When they see the comfort or salvation of God, then strength is given to their hands. Their hearts are encouraged. And faith takes place, takes the place of fear in their lives.

And so, uh, this is, this is highly individualistic, this chapter 12. It talks about an individual. And the individual says in verse 2, God is my salvation.

The great question of who God is has been answered by us by saying God is the God of wrath or God is the God of righteousness.

And, uh, this conversion has taken place so that the anger of the God of wrath has turned away. And the reality of the God of righteousness has broken through into his life.

[22 : 54] And so he says, God is not my destroyer. God is the one in whom I will trust. I will not be afraid. He is my strength and my song.

Those are the characteristics, then, of the citizen of Jerusalem. That he has one in whom he can trust. One in whom he can believe and not be afraid.

One who provides his strength. And one who fills his life with a song that has to break out. He has, in the end of verse 2, he has become my salvation.

Not just salvation, but to me personally. He has made known his righteous purpose. He has become not only salvation, but my salvation.

And then in verse 3 it says, He's encouraged me to draw water from the wells of salvation with joy. We have a well on Main Island.

[24 : 00] My wife is a gardener and likes using water. And she draws water. And I'm anxious that the well will run dry. But the wells of salvation, you draw water from them with joy.

Because the more water you draw, the more water is available. And you can assure anybody who wants to draw water from that well, that the resources are there.

And they can draw on it as deeply as they will. So he draws, that he makes the world aware of the fact that the wells of salvation are available.

That people know how they can, in a sense, excite the wrath of God. But here is where they find the love and righteousness of God in the well of salvation.

Salvation being the ultimate purpose of God, not the exercise of his wrath. And so, in verse 4, it moves from the individual experience to the corporate experience of the city.

[25 : 09] And it says this is what the people of the city are going to experience. In verse 4, On that day, they will give thanks to the Lord.

They will, that's in praise, they will call upon his name in prayer. They will make known among the nations.

That is, they will proclaim his name among the nations. They don't have to proclaim his wrath. People can find out about that for themselves.

But what people desperately need to know is the God of salvation is the God whom you know as the God of wrath. And you need to see that his ultimate and eternal purpose is salvation and not wrath.

And that's a great discovery. That's the discovery that leads to conversion. Making known what he has done. So that they proclaim his name.

[26 : 14] And they proclaim it to the whole world. The whole world is to know this. Because the whole world knows his wrath. So the whole world needs to know his salvation.

And the whole world is blind to, deaf to, and stubbornly unwilling to learn this about God until it is proclaimed to them in a way that they can't resist it.

And so the fifth verse is that in, I mean, in praising God, you sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things.

Let this be known to all the world. Shout and sing for joy. You see, that's what's at the heart of the city. And it comes, it addresses the city finally as a woman.

And who is, this woman is the people of Zion. And great among you is the Holy One of Israel. And so the city is responding, in a sense, as a wife to her husband.

[27 : 29] And recognizing the greatness of the God of Israel. The God who is the God of all the earth. So you have those two cities.

And Isaiah puts that before us and says, what kind of city do you want to belong to? The city which in its defiance of God can only know the wrath of God.

The city which, having come to terms with the anger of God, they have come to a point of turning to Him and putting their trust in Him.

Fear being taken away. And praise and joy, strength being given to their arms and a song being given to their hearts. That's the city to which you are called to belong.

And that's what Isaiah puts before us in order that we may know the two cities and we may know the purpose of God. which, as you know, is revealed finally and fully in the person of Jesus Christ, who came, in a sense, to show the consequences of the wrath of God by His death on the cross and the reality of God's salvation by His resurrection from the dead.

[29 : 00] And that's why in this communion service you're invited to enter into His, into the awareness of the wrath of God and by faith to claim the salvation which comes.

So those are the two cities. And Isaiah says to all of us, which one do you want to belong to? Amen.