

Glimpses of Glory God's Rule

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, and if you are just joining us, we are, as we have said, partway through the book of Isaiah, which we're working through this term. There is something quite majestic about the scope of this book.

It has a grandeur in its scope. The second verse of Isaiah calls the heavens and the earth to bear witness, and in the very last paragraph, we read of a new heaven and a new earth.

And so the journey of the book of Isaiah is from creation to new creation, such is the scope of it. It is cosmic, and cosmic renewal in a grand scale is what this book is about.

In God's wisdom and in his providence, that cosmic renewal is being worked out through this little nation of Judah, being played out through the pages of history.

In this little nation. And yet, as we open the book of Isaiah, it is quite dark days for Judah. You see, Judah is sitting, waiting, cowering in the corner like a little puppy, waiting for the mighty Assyrian army just on the other side of its northern borders to take up its arms and walk in and annex Judah, as it has done Israel previously.

[1 : 31] And so the question for Judah is, where is your security? What is it that you are hoping for?

Where is it you look for your hope? If you were here last week, the main idea was to turn to God's king for hope.

In repentance and faith, turn to God's king. Today, it's linked to that idea, but it's turn away from other things as well, is the point of today's message.

And so if you've got the St. Paul's app, three points. God and the nations. God and Judah. And God and us. So let's kick off, first of all, God and the nations.

Isaiah 1 to 12, which is where we finish last week, is the first main section of this prophecy. And it began with a focus on Judah, and it ends with a focus on the nations.

[2 : 41] And as we pick up the second major section of this book, which is chapters 13 to 27, we begin with a focus on the nations, and we end with a focus on Judah.

As a relatively small nation, it was constantly threatened by great powers. And Judah, therefore, was constantly tempted to look to political and military alliances in order to save her.

And so our concern today is really chapters 13 to 23, or really 13 to 27.

And if you've got a Bible in front of you and you flick through the pages, you'll see the chapter headings or the section headings, and those section headings will tell you exactly what these chapters are all about.

Now, they are 10 oracles, prophecies against the nations that are surrounding Judah. They are structured into two groups of five oracles, and each of the two groups of five begin with Babylon, the nation of Babylon.

[4 : 02] Now, Babylon historically is known as one of the seven wonders of the world. It's also the sacred capital and power base of the great king Nebuchadnezzar, who you can read about in the Old Testament book of Daniel.

And the reason Babylon comes first in both sections of five oracles is that in Bible thinking, Babylon is not just a real place, but it also is a symbol of collective human defiance and rebellion against God.

Babylon was historically built on the site of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

And the Tower of Babel being the monument to human desire to push God out of life and to make a name for ourselves.

It's the ultimate symbol, Tower of Babel, Genesis 11, the ultimate symbol of human rebellion against God. And it's a symbolism that's carried right through into the New Testament.

[5 : 18] 1 Peter 5, verse 13, the apostle Peter refers to the Roman Empire as Babylon. And likewise, the apostle John announces the ultimate downfall of prideful world powers at the end of time in Revelation 18, using the word Isaiah 21, fallen.

Fallen is Babylon. Babylon. Babylon. And so as we consider the grand scope of Isaiah, we also note that Babylon rises at the beginning of the Bible and it falls at the end of the Bible.

Babylon represents all that stands against God. All that is rebellious against God.

All that is an enemy of God. All that is about human pride and achievement without God. And even in chapter 13, which is our focus today, we are to understand that what is prophesied here about Babylon is more than just the nation.

In verse 11, we read God saying, I will punish the world for its evil. What that means is, as we look at chapter 13, and please have your Bibles open because you really need to have your Bibles open.

[6 : 51] I'll even pause for you to let you get it. Excellent. Going for apps, Bibles. If you need a Bible, put your hand up or take one from the person next to you.

What this means is, as we read about Babylon here in chapter 13, we are reading about the great cities of our own day.

What does God say to London, Tokyo, New York, Beijing, Dubai, Sydney? You could extend that and ask, what does God say to the great multinational companies of our day?

BHP and Apple and Amazon and Google and Meta. And what's more, what does God say about the great ideologies and opinion formers and culture shapers of our day of liberal democracy and Islam and secularism?

What does God say to everything that we have built for ourselves? Verse 6 of chapter 13. Wait for the day of the Lord is near.

[8 : 02] It will come like destruction from the Almighty. And then down into verse 9. The day of the Lord is coming, a cruel day with wrath and fierce anger to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

Both of those verses mention the day of the Lord. It represents both a particular time in history and something far deeper and greater as well.

It's first a reference to the year 539 BC when the Babylonian Empire finally fell.

It finally fell to the Medi-Persian Empire under Cyrus. But it also refers to a day that is yet to come when the Lord Jesus will return.

We see this at the end of the Bible. And do what he did here to Babylon to bring judgment upon the pride and the arrogance of all who dare to oppose him.

[9 : 10] And most of Isaiah 13, which was just read out to us, is a vivid description of what that day will be like.

What is it about our society that makes God in? Well, in one verse, we are given a telling insight into the mind of the judge of all people.

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.

In its essence, evil is the opposite of everything that's good. Evil is not a category that is reserved for some people, but not others.

It's a category that's reserved for all people, not just the worst of people. It's described in verse 11 as arrogance, pride, haughty, as sin.

[10 : 26] As the German theologian Martin Luther wrote, the human heart is curved in on itself. Definition of pride.

Curved in on itself. Looks to itself. That's the essence of the problem. We put ourselves where only God should be. Now, I'll be frank with you.

I do not tend to think of my neighbours or even of myself as evil. And yet, I have done things. I have said things and thought things that have caused harm to others.

And I still do. I've acted. I do act for my own advantage at the expense of others. I did it yesterday.

There was a long line of traffic. I rammed up on the inside and pushed in. The guy behind me didn't like it. But my car was bigger than his.

[11 : 32] In its essence, evil is the opposite of everything good. It is my heart curved in and of itself.

Think about myself first. I departed from the good ways of the God who made me. And God says humanity must be held accountable for it and he will punish the wicked for their sins.

God will bring low the pride, the proud. He will bring low the pride, the presumption of those who exalt themselves.

And so I ask you, have you ever believed your own publicity? Have you ever refused to let God be God?

Have you ever thought that his word is mistaken, misguided, wrong? Have you ever justified your behaviour? Even used the Bible to justify your behaviour?

[12:35] Have you ever justified your behaviour? Have you ever justified your behaviour? And so in verse 2, he will muster a mighty army through whom he will punish the proud.

Raise a banner on a bare hilltop. Shout to them, beckon to them to enter the gates of the nobles. I have commanded those I prepared for battle. I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath. Those who rejoice in my triumph. Listen, a noise on the mountains like that of a great multitude. Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms. Like nations massing together, the Lord Almighty is mustering an army for war.

They come from faraway lands, from the ends of the heavens. The Lord and the weapons of his wrath to destroy the whole country. That's God speaking to Babylon.

And the immediate result of God's judgment here is agonising helplessness, as we've all said in verse 6.

[13:44] It's sobering. Human greatness will come to nothing. Weapons, it says he, will fall from limp fingers. Nerves will flee from every heart.

And it's in this moment that the bankruptcy of human pride is laid bare. And the impotence of all sources of security, hope and trust that we have built for ourselves will be gone.

The flaming faces of verse 8 is shame. The shame of realising that my rejection of God has just been foolish.

We will all be in the same boat, but we'll all sing it upon ourselves. The shame of rejecting God. The foolishness of it.

And verses 9 to 18 is a devastating description of God's judgment. It is gut-wrenching. And so this should cause us to ask, what is it that we are trusting in to defend ourselves against Almighty God?

[15:08] Nothing will stand. Verse 19 is really telling Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the pride and glory of the Babylonians, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah.

You see, this is a message to Judah. Babylon's not hearing this. This is a message to Judah. And God's saying here, have a look at Babylon, Judah.

Look at it. The jewel of the kingdoms. And all Judah could see in that moment was the jewel of the kingdoms.

This great city, the glory and the splendour of Babylon. The first city in human history to get beyond 200,000 inhabitants. The glorious city that had spectacularly throughout its history defied God and succeeded.

God says it will fall. Judah, it will fall. Look to that hope and it will fall. And it did.

[16:22] It fell. It fell. And as we're told, it will never be rebuilt again.

In 1983, Saddam Hussein started to rebuild Babylon to again be a symbol of greatness in the world. He portrayed himself as the new Nebuchadnezzar, the new king of the Babylonian empire. He had his name inscribed on the bricks as Nebi before him did in the original Babylon.

He had large portraits of himself put alongside King Nebuchadnezzar at the entrance of the rebuilt Babylon. And signs throughout the city declared, this was built by Saddam Hussein, son of Nebuchadnezzar, king of kings, to glorify Iraq.

He ended up in a hole in the ground, running for his life.

[17:38] Defiant to the end, he is dead and God, gone. And the city that he was building for himself is still a ruins in the desert that you can visit today.

And so here the prophecy of Isaiah, nearly 3,000 years before that, she will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations.

There no nomads will pitch their tents. There no shepherds will rest their flocks. But desert creatures will lie there. Jackals will fill her houses.

There the owls will dwell. And there the wild goats will leap about. Hyenas will inhabit her strongholds. Jackals, her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand and her days will not be prolonged. You see, the message for Judah here as it gazes at great Babylon is very simple.

[18 : 48] Empires will come and go. Societies will rise and they will fall. Great companies and institutions will burst onto the scene and disappear.

The rulers and kings will come and go. And you will live. And you will die. I am so grateful to God for his timely providence of preaching today on Isaiah 13 to 23 and watching the coronation of King Charles III yesterday.

He's here and one day he will go. The British Empire has risen and it will fall.

The Church of England has risen and it, with all its pomp and ceremony yesterday, it too, unless it repents, will fall.

The grand scope of God's purposes from creation to new creation will continue. Jesus sits on his throne alone. From everlasting to everlasting.

[20 : 13] So, why is this for Judah? Why is Judah hearing this? Why is God revealing this to Isaiah for his people?

Now, the first thing to say is that what Isaiah is not doing in these chapters, Isaiah is not a self-righteous moraliser standing on the edges of society, waving his finger at society going, tut, tut, tut, tut, tut, tut.

You naughty people. As the Church has done in society. That's not what's happening here.

Neither is Isaiah simply a social reformer. All these chapters consist of brutal oracles against the different nations of the world for their pride and their rebellion.

And Isaiah never went on a preaching tour to those nations. They never heard these oracles. Isaiah isn't taking the platform of the United Nations, decrying the behaviour of the foreign powers.

[21 : 24] These oracles are recorded for the people of God. Designed to build the faith of the people of God and to deal with their idolatry.

It's about kicking idols and building faith. That's what these chapters are about. The primary purpose is to teach God's people about God, about his absolute control over every nation of the world, about the perfection of his justice.

They're designed for God's people to trust him, to lean on him, to cling to his word. You see, the main issue in the opening chapters of Isaiah is that Judah didn't trust in God.

They looked to other things for their security. And what is amazing about that is that we read in the early chapters that they had their religion. They were doing their sacrifices.

They were going to church. They were doing their community groups. They were reading their Bibles. So to speak. But God was not functionally the center of their life.

[22 : 50] They were looking to other nations as their security in the end. As a nation, Judah desired to defend her borders against a foreign aggressor, which is not a bad thing.

It's a good thing. The problem is that Judah, in that moment, decided to go with human wisdom and to trust in other nations for that security, rather than the God who had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, who provided for them and had for well over 2,000 years of their history protected them. And so God is demonstrating to Judah in these oracles, the naivety and the futility of trusting in human resources and power and wisdom.

You want to go to Babylon, Judah? It will soon be like Sodom and Gomorrah. What about the Philistines?

What about Cush? What about Egypt? What about Moab? No. No. No. And so what is happening in these chapters is that God takes his people on a journey around the compass, wherever Judah looked.

[24 : 15] She is seeing nations whose glory is fleeting and whose fate is sealed. And there is nowhere that she can look for her security but the Lord, the Lord who is the Lord of all the earth, the ruler of nations, the judge of humanity.

In chapter 17, Judah is told to look to Damascus. Look at Damascus. This is their brothers to the north, the ten tribes of Israel to the north.

Assyria destroyed those ten tribes of the north, sorry, destroyed Damascus in 732 BC. Ten years later, it completely obliterated the nation.

Look to Damascus. What was their problem? What did they do? They foolishly aligned themselves with Syria in order to defeat the Assyrians.

And they lost. But the real reason for her downfall was her long, long history of idolatry.

[25 : 30] Long history of idolatry which eroded her single-minded commitment to Yahweh, to their God, and opened her up to the politics of convenience and worldly wisdom instead of trusting their

God.

And so, in chapter 17, verses 7 and 8, we have the pivotal passage of repentance. In that day, people will look to their maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.

They will not look to the altars, the work of their hands. In other words, don't just look to God for your hope, but turn away from your false gods at the same time.

what we see here is that God has declared war on idolatry. It's in the New Testament as well.

And it's particularly in the New Testament that we see how God has declared war on our idolatry.

we are to look to our maker who on Mount Zion took on the role of Babylon for us.

[27 : 06] He took on our rebellion and our sin and became the consummate enemy of God. The eternal and glorious, the eternal and glorious maker and judge of humanity experienced demise for us.

He experienced shame for sin, shame for rebellion, shame for our idolatry. He experienced death.

And yet his resurrection was a triumphant victory over all the corrupt political processes and the false allegiances that resulted in his undeserved death.

The Jewish nationalism, the betrayal of Judas for 30 pieces of silver, the cruelty of the Roman cross were all expressions of the Babylonian principle in this world.

And on Mount Zion as the nations looked on our maker cried out his last breath it is finished.

[28 : 24] And with those words God's enemies can now be his people and find refuge in him not fear refuge refuge.

And so God is inviting us here to look across history see how empires have fallen and realize that they are all pointers to a great and even greater and more terrible day of judgment when we will give an account before God.

That's what he's doing here with Judah and looking at Babylon and these nations. We are invited to read the writing that's on the wall just as King Belshazzar did as he partied carefree on the very night the Babylonian empire fell.

It was overrun and the writing was on the wall and we're meant to read the writing that's on the wall as he did on that night. It's written right across human history God has numbered our days we have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

How are we able to stand against the almighty? The only answer is captured in the Christian song lyrics dressed in his righteousness alone faultless I stand before the throne on Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand.

[30 : 11] That's the message for Judah. That's the message for Judah. So let's just close off and have a look at us for a moment.

this whole chunk of Isaiah has the aim of demolishing any confidence that we might have in our own resources and human wisdom and human methods and ingenuity.

It's designed to crush our idols and to build faith. Not just to turn to God in faith but it's designed to crush our idols our other alternative gods that we have built our lives on.

Now idolatry looks a little bit different for us than it did for Judah. It might have similar roots but for instance we might be looking to other nations for our ultimate security rather than God.

That's possible. But there's a word in the New Testament that means inordinate desires and it's strongly linked to the idea of Old Testament idolatry.

[31 : 27] Every single sin that we commit, every thought, every action that we have that's a sin has a deeper source to that action.

There's a sin that's beneath the sin and the sin that's beneath the sin is that each one of us has idols that we trust in rather than Jesus Christ for our outstanding with God and others.

Romans 1 tells us that we create idols because we want to have control over our lives. We don't want to trust God. We want to control our lives ourselves. Galatians 4 tells us idolatry is linked to our self salvation.

1 John 5 tells us the idolatry is taking good things and making them ultimate things.

They are things that we really get our sense of worth, our value, our security. As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to push God to one side, his word to one side, idolatry.

[33 : 17] It can be a physical object, it could be a property, it could be a person, it could be an activity, it could be a role, it could be an institution, it could be a hope, it could be an image, it could be a pleasure, it could be a hero, it could even be a theology.

idolatry. And so there's a whole range of them and they're all different for all of us. We can have a power idolatry, an approval idolatry, a comfort idolatry, a giftedness idolatry, a control idolatry, a helping idolatry, a dependence idolatry, an independence idolatry, a work idolatry, an achievement idolatry, a materialism idolatry, a religion idolatry, an irreligion idolatry, a cultural idolatry, a family idolatry, a relationship idolatry, a suffering idolatry, an image idolatry, an ideology idolatry, and on the list goes and goes and goes.

And these oracles are designed to pull the rug out from all of them and to show us their powerlessness because everything you put at the center of your heart, the center of your life. If it's not your maker, it will control you. It will cause you to work for it. It will cause you to give yourself to it.

Only Jesus Christ, our true maker, our true sovereign, our true savior, gives himself to us to set us free.

[35 : 16] These chapters here are designed to expose our own idols for the powerless jokes that they are. If you're not convinced of that, I would invite you in this week to visit two places, the rubbish tip and the cemetery.

There you will discover the end of all life and the end of all things. The rubbish tip and the cemetery. The cemetery. future. The future. The future. The future. The future. The future. The future. Judah looked to the nations.

What are you looking to? What are you looking to? I'm going to do what I did last week. Close off our time together.

I'm going to invite you to bow your heads. Put your hands out. I'm going to ask you some questions that might just get the start of the ball rolling for you and then I'm going to pray for us.

[36 : 35] Let me pray to start with. Jesus help us to see you.

Help us to love you. Help us to obey you. And in doing that help us to see the idols of our heart that displace you from the center of our hearts.

And so I ask you what is your greatest nightmare? What is it that you worry about the most?

What brings out of me the strongest emotions? What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go badly or become difficult?

What makes me feel the most self-worth? What am I the proudest of? What do I need, I mean really need other people to see in me?

[38 : 09] What do I really want and expect out of life? what would really make me happy? I wonder if the way we answer those questions expose the heart that would defy God if it had to.

gracious God we confess that we have built our hearts and our lives around things that are good but not the best and so we confess our idolatry.

We have made these things absolutes things that love us. And what are they compared to you? If we have you we don't have to have these other things.

These idols cannot love us, help us, give us hope or significance or save us as you do. and so we ask that you would please forgive us.

Please forgive us for trampling on your love for us. Please forgive us for our lack of gratitude, our lack of grateful joy for all that you've done for us.

[39 : 40] As hard as it is, we desire to push these idols out from the centre of our lives. They are repulsive to you and will only lead to our ruin.

And so help each one of us to see them clearly, to weigh them against all of your goodness and to expel them from the centre of our lives by your grace.

Replace them with your gospel by your spirit for your glory and our joy. Amen. Amen.