ISAIAH — LESSON 5

WHEN NATIONS TRUST THEIR OWN STRENGTH

Scripture: Isaiah Chapters 17–23
Theme: Earthly power is temporary, but God's promises endure. Our ultimate security is found in Him.

OPENING STORY — THE ENEMIES WHO BECAME BROTHERS

Imagine living in Jerusalem during Isaiah's lifetime.

Everywhere you look, nations are preparing for war.

Assyria is expanding its empire, conquering cities, destroying armies, and forcing smaller nations into submission.

Egypt is struggling to maintain its influence. Syria and Israel have threatened Judah. And the people of Jerusalem are asking themselves a frightening question:

Who is going to protect us?

Should we form an alliance with Egypt? Pay tribute to Assyria? Build stronger walls? Or prepare for war?

Then Isaiah delivers a prophecy that must have sounded almost unbelievable.

He describes a future in which Egypt, Assyria, and Israel—three nations with a long history of hostility—will worship the same God.

Think about that.

Egypt once enslaved the Israelites.

Assyria terrorized the region and would eventually destroy Israel's northern kingdom.

And Israel was struggling to survive.

Yet Isaiah declares that God will someday bless all three nations.

In Isaiah 19:25, God says:

"Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance." (KJV)

Did you catch that?

God calls Egypt **"my people."**

He calls Assyria **"the work of my hands."**

And He calls Israel **"mine inheritance."**

The very nations that threatened God's people are included in a remarkable vision of future peace and blessing.

Now, we need to understand that Isaiah is describing a prophetic future, not something that happened immediately during his lifetime.

But consider what this must have meant to the people listening.

They were worried about surviving the next invasion. Isaiah was speaking about a future when enemies would worship together.

What kind of God looks beyond the hatred and violence of the present and envisions reconciliation between enemies?

The same God who would one day send His Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile humanity to Himself.

And perhaps that's one of the most important messages we can take from today's lesson.

God's plans are greater than the conflicts we see around us.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Isaiah 17–23 continues a series of prophecies concerning the nations surrounding Judah.

During much of Isaiah's ministry, Assyria was the dominant military power in the region.

Smaller kingdoms faced difficult choices. They could resist Assyria, seek military alliances, pay tribute, or risk invasion and destruction.

Judah was caught in the middle.

Its leaders frequently looked toward Egypt and other neighboring countries for protection.

But Isaiah warned that these nations were themselves vulnerable.

His message was not that military preparation was always wrong. It was that Judah must not place its ultimate trust in foreign powers while forgetting God.

These seven chapters contain prophecies about Damascus, Israel, Cush, Egypt, Babylon, Edom, Arabia, Jerusalem, and Tyre.

They do not all describe events occurring at the same time. Some concern Isaiah's own historical setting, while others look toward later judgments and restoration.

Together, they demonstrate God's authority over every nation—not merely Judah.

CHAPTER 17 — DAMASCUS AND ISRAEL

When People Forget the God Who Saves Them

Key Scripture: Isaiah 17:7–10

Isaiah predicts judgment against Damascus, the capital of Aram (Syria), and against the northern kingdom of Israel.

These two nations had previously joined forces against Judah.

But their alliance could not protect them from Assyria.

Damascus fell to Assyria in approximately 732 BC, and the northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC.

Isaiah describes abandoned cities, disappearing military strength, and populations greatly reduced by war.

Yet in the middle of this judgment, he describes people turning their eyes back toward their Creator.

In verse 10, Isaiah identifies the underlying spiritual problem:

"Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation..."

What Isaiah was teaching: The people had placed their confidence in alliances, military strength, and false gods while neglecting the Lord.

What we can learn: Success and security can sometimes lead us to forget how dependent we are on God.

CHAPTER 18 — CUSH

When God Appears to Be Silent

Key Scripture: Isaiah 18:4–7

Cush was a kingdom south of Egypt, associated with ancient Nubia, primarily in what is now Sudan.

During Isaiah's lifetime, Cush was an important regional power, and its rulers also became involved in Egypt's affairs.

The chapter describes messengers traveling between nations during a period of international anxiety.

While rulers are making plans, God describes Himself as quietly watching from His dwelling place.

But God's silence is not inactivity.

Isaiah uses the illustration of a vineyard. Just before the fruit ripens, branches are cut away.

The image warns that God can intervene at the moment He chooses.

The chapter ends with gifts being brought to the Lord at Mount Zion.

What Isaiah was teaching: God governs the affairs of nations even when His actions are not immediately visible. Powerful peoples, too, must acknowledge Him.

What we can learn: We should not mistake God's apparent silence for an absence of concern or authority.

CHAPTER 19 — EGYPT

From Judgment to Healing and Reconciliation

Key Scripture: Isaiah 19:19–25

This is one of the most remarkable chapters in our lesson.

Isaiah begins by describing serious trouble coming upon Egypt.

The nation faces internal conflict, failed leadership, economic hardship, and distress involving the Nile River, the source of much of Egypt's prosperity.

Egypt's idols and political leaders cannot provide lasting security.

But the prophecy takes an extraordinary turn.

Beginning in verse 18, Isaiah describes a future in which Egyptians acknowledge and worship the Lord.

God hears their cries and promises deliverance.

Verse 22 describes God striking Egypt, but also healing it when the people turn toward Him.

Then comes the astonishing promise.

A highway will connect Egypt and Assyria, and people from both nations will worship together.

Israel will share in that blessing.

These are not merely predictions about peaceful diplomatic relations. Isaiah envisions former enemies united in the worship of the Lord.

What Isaiah was teaching: God's judgment is real, but His purposes also include repentance, healing, and blessing beyond Israel.

What we can learn: No nation or people are beyond the reach of God's mercy.

Connection to Jesus: In Ephesians 2:14–16, Paul explains how Christ breaks down hostility and reconciles people to God through the cross.

Isaiah's vision and Paul's teaching are not identical passages about the same immediate historical event, but they share the remarkable theme of reconciliation.

CHAPTER 20 — ISAIAH'S DRAMATIC WARNING

When God's Message Becomes a Living Illustration

Key Scripture: Isaiah 20:1–6

This chapter reveals something unusual about Isaiah's ministry.

In approximately 711 BC, Assyria's army captured Ashdod, a Philistine city that had rebelled against Assyrian authority.

Judah was watching these events anxiously.

Some people hoped Egypt and Cush might provide protection against Assyria.

God instructed Isaiah to remove his sackcloth and sandals and go about barefoot and described as naked.

For three years, Isaiah served as a living sign warning of the humiliation that would come upon Egypt and Cush.

Scholars differ about the precise degree of undress intended by the Hebrew description. He may have worn only a minimal undergarment.

Either way, his appearance would have been humiliating for a respected prophet.

Imagine seeing Isaiah walking through Jerusalem in this condition!

People must have wondered what he was doing.

But the message was serious.

The powerful nations Judah hoped would protect them would themselves face defeat and humiliation.

At the end of the chapter, the people ask where they can turn for deliverance.

What Isaiah was teaching: Egypt and Cush could not guarantee Judah's security against Assyria.

What we can learn: People and institutions may be helpful, but none can take the place of our dependence on God.

CHAPTER 21 — BABYLON, EDOM, AND ARABIA

No Kingdom Is Too Powerful to Fall

Key Scripture: Isaiah 21:6–10

Isaiah delivers three prophetic messages concerning Babylon, Dumah (associated with Edom), and Arabia.

The most dramatic concerns Babylon.

Isaiah describes a watchman observing an approaching force and announcing the downfall of the city.

Then comes the famous declaration:

"Babylon is fallen, is fallen..." — Isaiah 21:9 (KJV)

In the traditional understanding of Isaiah's authorship, this looks ahead to the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians in 539 BC.

The chapter also includes shorter, more difficult oracles concerning Dumah and Arabia, warning of uncertainty, warfare, and diminished strength.

Some historical details and fulfillments remain debated.

What Isaiah was teaching: Even impressive kingdoms and wealthy trading societies are subject to God's judgment.

What we can learn: Earthly power is temporary. We should be careful about placing our ultimate confidence in anything that can disappear.

Connection to Jesus: Revelation later uses Babylon as a symbol of worldly pride and opposition to God, contrasting its downfall with Christ's lasting victory.

CHAPTER 22 — JERUSALEM

Preparing for Trouble While Forgetting God

Key Scripture: Isaiah 22:8–11

Now Isaiah turns from foreign nations to Jerusalem itself.

The city is facing danger.

Its leaders inspect their weapons, assess damage to the walls, and make preparations to secure their water supply.

These are sensible defensive measures.

But Isaiah identifies a deeper problem.

The people are concentrating on protecting themselves while failing to look toward the God who made and sustained them.

The chapter also describes the irresponsible palace official Shebna, who seeks personal honor, and his replacement by Eliakim.

Eliakim receives authority over the royal household, represented by the key of David's house.

In verse 22, Isaiah describes authority to open what none can shut and shut what none can open.

This imagery later appears in Revelation 3:7, where it is applied to Jesus Christ.

What Isaiah was teaching: Jerusalem needed more than military preparations. Its leaders needed humility, responsible stewardship, and faithfulness to God.

What we can learn: Planning is important, but our plans should never become substitutes for trusting God.

CHAPTER 23 — TYRE

When Wealth Becomes Our Security

Key Scripture: Isaiah 23:8–9

Tyre was a prosperous Phoenician trading city on the Mediterranean coast.

Its merchants traveled widely, exchanging goods across the ancient world.

Tyre's commercial importance made it wealthy and influential.

But Isaiah announces that its prosperity cannot protect it from judgment.

The chapter describes the disruption of trade, the humiliation of its leaders, and the loss of commercial influence.

Isaiah also speaks of a future restoration after seventy years, when Tyre's commercial earnings would ultimately be devoted to the Lord.

The precise historical fulfillment of the seventy-year period is debated.

What Isaiah was teaching: Commercial success and political influence do not make a nation independent of God.

What we can learn: Wealth can be a blessing and a useful resource, but it should never become the foundation of our identity or faith.

Connection to Jesus: In Matthew 6:19–21, Jesus reminds His followers that earthly treasures are temporary and that what we treasure reveals the condition of our hearts.

THREE SCRIPTURES FOR CLOSER STUDY

Rather than reading all seven chapters aloud, let's concentrate on three passages.

1. Isaiah 19:22–25 — Reconciliation

God describes Egypt, Assyria, and Israel sharing His blessings.

Consider how astonishing that promise would have sounded to people living under the threat of invasion.

2. Isaiah 20:1–6 — Trust

Isaiah becomes a living illustration of the danger of relying upon powers that cannot ultimately save.

3. Isaiah 22:8–11 — Dependence on God

Jerusalem prepares for war but neglects to look toward the Lord.

Together, these passages show us God's desire for reconciliation, the limitations of human power, and the importance of faith.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Judah's leaders were tempted to trust Egypt and other powerful nations rather than rely on God?

2. In Isaiah 18, God appears to observe events quietly before acting. What does that teach us about patience and trusting God's timing?

3. What is so remarkable about Isaiah's prophecy that Egypt, Assyria, and Israel will someday worship God together?

4. Isaiah became a living illustration of God's warning in chapter 20. Why do you think God sometimes used unusual actions to communicate through His prophets?

5. Jerusalem made preparations for war but neglected its relationship with God. How can we make the same mistake when facing difficult situations?

6. Tyre's prosperity became a source of confidence. How can Christians enjoy material blessings without allowing money or possessions to become their greatest source of security?

7. What does Jesus teach us about reconciliation, forgiveness, and loving those we consider enemies?

8. Looking across these seven chapters, what do you believe is the most important lesson Isaiah wanted his listeners to understand?

FINDING JESUS IN ISAIAH

These seven chapters were not originally written as a continuous series of direct prophecies about the birth or ministry of Jesus.

They were God's messages to real nations facing real circumstances.

But the truths they reveal help us understand the world into which Jesus would eventually come.

Isaiah describes a world divided by power struggles, fear, pride, greed, and war.

Jesus entered a world facing many of those same problems.

And through His life, death, and resurrection, He offered something earthly kings and nations could never guarantee:

Reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, and the hope of everlasting life.

Isaiah 19 presents a vision of former enemies united in worship.

The New Testament reveals that through Christ, God's invitation extends to people from every nation.

The God who rules over nations is also the God who calls people to Himself through Jesus Christ.

CLOSING THOUGHT — WHERE IS OUR TRUST?

Throughout these seven chapters, Isaiah describes nations relying on military strength, alliances, wealth, commerce, and political influence.

Yet none of these could provide lasting security.

And amid the warnings, God reveals something remarkable.

He sees beyond the conflicts dividing people.

He offers the possibility of repentance, healing, and reconciliation.

The lesson for us is not that governments, wealth, or responsible preparation are unimportant.

It is that none of them should become more important than our relationship with God.

Our greatest security is not found in what we possess, what we accomplish, or whom we know. It is found in the One who created us and loves us.

And through Jesus Christ, we discover the fullness of that love.