

The Lord Is King

The Gospel According to Isaiah

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Well, today we're moving to a new section of the book of Isaiah. This is a whole brand new ballgame and this next section is the bit that you usually skip if you're reading through Isaiah because it's just a record. It seems to be at least on the surface, a record of the nations round about. It's as if Isaiah sat down with his map and he kind of targets all the countries roundabout little Israel, right in the middle there and he identifies them, he speaks of them. He talks to them and he challenges them with the word of God. What's remarkable in reading it is, of course, that Isaiah having spent the first 12 chapters of this book addressing the church and we've been feeling that, we've been feeling the impact of that ourselves upon us as Christian people because he's addressing the people of God, that he should now turn his sights outside, beyond the boundaries of the church, beyond the boundaries of Israel as it was then and in terms of our understanding of how to relate that to ourselves in New Testament terms. The Church of Jesus Christ, looking out to the world, the world outside. He addresses the world outside. Which teaches us what? It teaches us that it is the business of the church not only to speak to itself, though that's primarily its business, but it's also the business of the church to speak to the world.

And what do we have to say to the world? Well, it's not pious platitudes and one of the things we're going to discover is, that the business of the church, its prophetic business, is to proclaim to the world that it is guilty, that the world, even the world outside of Israel has a responsibility and an accountability to God. In other words, the knowledge of God is not confined to the Israel of God. The knowledge of God is built into the hearts and minds and consciences of men and women all around this globe and everyone is accountable to God. And so we have the opportunity to speak to the world. And the larger context of course is, that Isaiah has, and for the sake of English guests, and we have some, that would be Isaiah to you. Isaiah, you see I'm getting into the swing of things here. We do have some English guests I know that, that's why I translated for them. One of the things Isaiah has been developing in the first little part is, this picture of the one who's coming, the one who is to come who is to be born of a virgin, whose name is to be Emmanuel or whose role is to be God with us, will possess and own and be the Lord of the land, that is the land, the promised place. Who will have divine honors and titles, that whole regiment of titles: mighty God everlasting, Father, Prince of Peace, who will be the one who will bring a new heavens and a new earth, a transformed universe, chapter 11. This one stakes his claim. This is the point of this next section of Isaiah right through to

chapter 35. This one who is the new David stakes his royal claim not only on his own people the church, but on the world as a whole and all the world will find its fulfillment and its safety and its connection to the new David. That really is a summary of chapters 13 to 35, but I'm not letting you go home yet. Just in case you thought having given you a summary that's the end. Oh no, no, no, there's a lot of suffering for you yet.

So what we have here in the section we're looking at today are two chapters that belong together in which the main focus is Babylon, but as well as the main focus, it has some subsidiary references and you'll see that in a moment as he refers to Syria and Philistia and so on. But the theme of the section is that the Lord is King. And I want to take us through these two chapters to point out some elements that I think are profitable for us.

First of all, the Lord is King above all earthly purposes. The Lord is King above all earthly purposes. In chapter 13, verse 17, "Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them," against who? Against the Babylonians. In chapter 14, verse 24, "The Lord has sworn as I have planned so shall it be." And the opening words of chapter 13, "An oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amos saw." What we are about to see in these two chapters are Isaiah reflecting on what was going to happen shortly in the life of Judah and Israel and what was going to happen about 150 years in the future from his point of reference in the life of Israel and Judah and then what was going to happen at the end of history. And so what he says about the immediate future being fulfilled and what he says about what's going to happen in 150 years time being fulfilled, we, this is a New Testament perspective, we on whom the ends of the ages have come, have found in Isaiah a sure word of prophecy. A reliable word of God to give us guidance in our day when there are no prophets like Isaiah. And where there are no signs and wonders as there were through the apostles. In our day, we come to this word, this prophetic word of Isaiah and we find here this is the sure word of God and his burden is to speak to us about the very, very, very far distance still to us, day of the Lord. Verse 6, and again in verse 9, the day of the Lord.

And as he begins to get us geared up to think about that last day, that's the last day of history, he introduces us to some trailers for the last day. Here are the trailers: first of all Babylon. He tells us about Babylon as I say in verse 1 of chapter 13 and he begins to describe the story of the future of Babylon, this important city. Now, as Isaiah writes this, you must understand that Babylon at this point is not the world power, that's 150 years in the future, but it is an important city and so what he's doing is he's predicting what's going to happen to Babylon. Babylon is going to become an important power, a great power, a great empire. There are people who are going to read Isaiah's work when they are living in the days of Babylon and they're going to read this and they are going to say to themselves, "The penny's dropped, Isaiah the prophet, 100% got it right about the Assyrians. He 100% got it right about the Babylonians. Therefore we should take his writings as the word of God." That's how Isaiah got into the Jewish Bible. I mean, the Jews were not going to let into the Bible based on what he said about them. We've spent time looking at what he says about them. It got into the Bible, not on the basis of Isaiah getting out his machine gun and letting go at the Jews in Israel, which is what he does in the early part of this book. It gets into the Bible because what he says about Israel and Judah, what he says about a Assyria and Babylonia comes true. It is the word of God

100%. It's in our Bible because things he said about events that were to happen a hundred years into the future came true precisely as he prophesied and because they came true, we believe that what he says about what's ahead of us will come true as well.

So the Lord is King above all earthly purposes. The future of Babylon and Assyria and Philistia as he describes it in these two chapters, has been ordered already by God. "The Lord of hosts," verse 24, "has sworn I have planned it so it shall be. I have purposed it so shall it stand." God's word would come true. Verse 27, chapter 14, "The Lord of hosts has purposed who can annul it? His hand has stretched out, who will turn back?" What that delivers to you and me is this argument: you can trust the word of God, you can trust the purpose of God, it will not be frustrated. What happened to Assyria happened 2,500 years ago. What happened to Babylon and Philistia? They were extinguished. They've gone off the page of history as the word of God declared and you can trust the purpose of God. God has a purpose for history. He has a purpose for the world. He has a purpose for the nations. He has a purpose for our church. The Lord is King above all earthly purposes.

Second lesson is this: the Lord is King above all earthly powers. Chapter 13, from verse 2 and onwards, he is talking about the rise and fall of Babylon but beyond that he's doing something else: he's talking about the rise and fall of the world system. I think you can see that if you look at verse 11 where he is talking about Babylon and then he starts talking about the world. "I will punish the world for its evil." Again in verse 13, he's talking about Babylon but he goes on to say this, "I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place." What is he speaking about? Ultimately he is speaking about the far distant future. Verse 6, of chapter 13, "The day of the Lord is near, destruction from the Almighty, it will come." Verse 9, "The day of the Lord comes, cruel with wrath and fierce anger to make a desolation and destroy its sinners from it." What is he talking about? He's talking about the last day of human history. But he's also talking about Babylon and what he says is this, "When you see what happens to Babylon, you're seeing a trailer for the very last day of human history." It's a little foretaste of that final day when God will bring everything to nothing.

Now the reason for using Babylon here is, of course, the history of the very word and the place itself. You know that right at the very beginning of the Bible, we're introduced to this place in the land of Shinar called Babel. Babel represents the first organized attempt by human beings to have a society and a community that has no reference whatsoever to the God of heaven. The whole great project or plan of Babel was to construct a society that would survive whatever the heavens sent it. They would survive, "We will survive." I will survive, there's a song like that and that was precisely the object and goal of the Babylonians. And they built an empire based on that. Babylon is built on the site of Babel.

So Babel and Babylonia come to stand for, in the Bible, a kind of code word for the secular city, the city of man, the world system organized without reference to God. You can see that in the book of Revelation for example. In Revelation, John the writer takes what is written here in chapter 13 about Babylon and later in chapter 22 what is written about Tyre the city of Tyre and he kind of blends them together and he uses the language as a description of what he calls mystery Babylon the great, Babylon the harlot, Babylon

which is the machinery of world movement and civilization and merchandising and consumerism and power politics and ideas and philosophies and influence. Babylon stands for everything of the world system. In other words, the New Testament word for Babylon is the world, the world as an organized entity from which the God of heaven is excluded.

And when he talks about the day of the Lord, he is thinking about that final day when the whole world system, like Babylon and Assyria, will be brought to nothing. And it's against that background we look at God summoning, "The mighty men to execute my anger," verse 2 of chapter 13, "the day of the Lord brings destruction from the Almighty." Here is God summoning, clicking his finger as it were and this great army comes to finish off the story of humanity. This is the ultimate holy war. It is not conducted by the church against people. It is conducted by God against his enemies. What is forbidden to Christians, that is retaliation and vengeance, is not forbidden to God. In fact, the Christian's cry is, "Vengeance belongs to the Lord." We let him do that, that's his business and what this is saying to us is, it is his business and he will conduct his business to a final and decisive conclusion. The world system will one day be exposed to the unmitigated wrath of God. Now why do we struggle with this idea? We struggle with it because we have a low view of the majesty of God on the one hand and we have a terribly low view of what sin is on the other hand. We don't see that sin is an affront to the majesty of God. He is blisteringly holy. Sometimes you get a glimpse of the seriousness of sin. In our own lives or in the life of the world, we see something happen in which people are brought to book. So the Lord is above all earthly powers.

And then buried in the middle of this section, we learn that God is King, the Lord is King above all earthly promises. Look at verses 1 and 2 of chapter 14. What do I mean by this? Well, what I mean by this is as you look at these two chapters together, you see Babylon which becomes a great empire, Assyria which is the current threat and was a great empire in its day, Philistia which was an ongoing irritant in the life of Israel from the time of King David right through, these are powerful influences. These are the things that get the people of God down, that tempt them into sin. They introduce into the people of God their own idolatry and their own gods and their own practices and their own evil. These are the opponents of the people of God. And you may think to yourself, "Where are the people of God? Where are all the believers in all of this? When the world is throwing everything it has at us at various points in our history, where are the people of God?" Well notice this, verse 1, "The Lord will again have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel." In other words, he'll follow up his choice. He has chosen his elect people from the earth. He has chosen his Israel, the Israel of God. And do you notice the Israel of God consists not just of descendants of the house of Jacob, that is Jews, but you notice that there are sojourners and others who have joined themselves and attached themselves to the house of Jacob. Here are converted Gentiles, believing Gentiles who are by the grace of God joined to believing Jews to become part of the Israel of God. They become part, attached to, joined to the house of Jacob and they become part of what God is doing in the world. In other words, God will follow up in his promise. The elect are safe in God's hands.

How safe are they? Are they like the little fishes? You know when the fish are startled, the mother fish kind of moves around and her little fishes follow her everywhere she goes. Is that the picture? Or is it the picture of the baby monkey who clings for dear life to its mother, as its mother swings from branch to branch to get away from some enemy? You know, the picture that's painted here is the picture of a kitten, which is snatched by the mother's jaws and lifted out of danger and taken to a place of safety. When the Lord acts for his people, the Lord will again have compassion on his people. He acts to rescue his people. In other words, no matter how hard it is right now, no matter how much pressure you feel right now, no matter how much you feel attacked right now, no matter how much you feel perhaps God has abandoned you right now, the Lord will yet have compassion on his Israel. He will yet have compassion on his people. He works all things together for their good. He will rescue his people from every danger.

I have a friend here this weekend, her husband has a church in London and when I would go to that church for a meeting or whatever, I'd get off the tube and I'd walk past a little plaque on the side of a wall in Smithfield and on that plaque it had the names of over 200 martyrs who were burned alive for their faith in the Lord Jesus during the reign of Bloody Mary, Mary Tudor. That happens, that kind of thing is happening in the world today. It's happening to the church of God. If not being burned alive at the stake, it's happening with evil ideas bombarding the church, sins bombarding the church, evils bombarding the church, people burning buildings. These Christians in China right now surrounding their church building because the local government wants to knock their brand-new church down. The church of God is surrounded by enemies of one kind or another, but the Lord will yet have compassion on his people. Never forget that because God is King above all earthly promises. He keeps his promises. They are heavenly promises.

Then fourthly and lastly, the Lord is King above all earthly pretensions. We have a poem in chapter 14, verses 4 to 21. It's a beautifully constructed poem, the scholar's say it's the work of a master and it's the announcement of the end of a proud king who has exalted himself. A person with a great reputation; a person who is described as the scepter of rulers; a person who is able to silence all his enemies; a person of great influence; and a person who is Babylon's king in this passage. It's a human being that's in view and we find that the fundamental sin of this human being is the sin of pride. And there are two things in this poem. First of all, there's the rise of pride. If you go down to verse 12, here's what they said about this great figure. They said that the sun shines out of his face. They said he is godlike in his ways. They said there is nobody like this great figure, this daystar, the son of dawn, a kind of heavenly being. That's how they thought of him. They thought of him as you can't get any higher, you can't get any greater, you can't get any more powerful or any more wonderful or any more awesome or any more fearful than this individual.

But now you see, it talks about the rise of pride in his heart. Look at verse 13, 14, "You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the cloud. I will make myself like the most high." Here is classical hubris. A godlike immunity to the normal general rules everybody else has to

live by. Here's a figure characterized by the most basic sin of pride. If you have a grandparent, you ask them if they remember when Yuri Gagarin went into space. He was a Russian. At that time the Premier of Russia was a man called Nikita Khrushchev, kind of a comical character except he was a ruthless character. He's the man who famously took off his shoe in the General Assembly of the United Nations and started banging it. I thought of doing that here, just to keep you awake. Banging it on the table, he was a character but Nikita Khrushchev said as they were preparing to send Yuri Gagarin into space, he made this very famous remark that, "We'll go into space and if there's a God we'll find him and we'll knock him off his little throne."

Well, Nikita Khrushchev's gone and God is still there and in a sense that's what we find in the picture of this figure who's being described here. I say it's a human figure and it is, but from the time of the early church fathers, people have seen here an echo of Jesus' teaching about the fall of Satan. And of course elsewhere in the New Testament, this kind of hubris is attached to Satan himself. It is as if Satan himself, the highest of all the angelic beings that God made, the most gifted, the most talented, the most brilliant, the most powerful, the most influential, so Ezekiel describes him, had the merchandise going through his hands of praise from the lower creatures going to God and power from God going down to low creatures as he's working, sending the praise towards God and the power down towards low creatures. At some point in the operation, he stops to look at what's going through his hands and he thinks to himself, "I want the praise and I want the power for myself. I want to be like God." That was Satan's pride kicking in and here is this individual, a prince of Babylon and the same kind of thing goes on in his heart. He grabs for the power and he grabs for the praise that belongs only to God.

Do you know in the New Testament that it is precisely for this reason that we are warned never to appoint anyone to an office or a position of power in the church who is immature. Why? Because they will be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Pride leads to a fall. It did for the devil. It did for this Babylonian king. It does for you and me. You see, the reality is, once I start to believe my own press clippings, maybe not mine, but you begin to believe yours, because mine are all negative, but you begin to believe your press clippings, once you begin to believe the things that people say to you, about you, do you know what happens? You've broken the first commandment. Can I tell you this about God? God keeps the first commandment. There is no God but God. There is no God but God. God is absolutely centered on his own Godness. The first commandment says we are to love God above all other things and the root of pride is, that I allow myself to believe in me instead of in God. I make myself the center of the world. John Piper often addresses this kind of thing in his writings and he says, "What is the chief end of God?" God. God doesn't need to be jealous except for his own glory because there is no glory higher. When you say, "Well, isn't God humble? He asks us to be humble. Isn't God humble?" Well, God has nothing to be humble about. Nothing. Although he learned humility didn't he, when he took on our humanity and the Incarnate Christ, he humbled himself for a little while to take on our humanity and the role of a servant and now God has highly exalted him, given him the name that is above all names.

Beware of the rise of pride the world lives soaked, bathing in pride. Pride of place, pride of race, pride of name, pride of influence, pride of wealth, pride of power, pride of talents, pride of gifts, pride. God will humble the proud. In fact, here we have the demise of pride, look at verse 9 of chapter 14, "Sheol," the abode of the dead, the place of punishment, the equivalent of what we call hell, "Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come." Here's this man, he's now died. All his life he's been adulated, congratulated. All his life he's done what he wanted; he's walked over people; he's walked over nations; he's made himself influential; he's done all of these things and all of his life he has done these things and now he's dead. Now he goes to hell and there are people in hell who were scared of him when he was alive. There were people in hell who were in awe of him when he was alive. There are people in hell who's first and initial reaction when he was alive would've been to kind of shrink in the presence of this great man or fall down before this great man or to start applauding this great man but now he's in hell. Now he's in hell and the people there are roused to greet you, verse 9, all who were leaders in the earth, all these great people are now shadows of their former selves and this great man is only a shadow like they are. Just shadows of what they once were. Well, they once were his god. Well, all they had constructed for themselves has all been eradicated. Their pride is punctured. Their pretensions are swept away. All pomp and circumstances has turned to ashes in their hands. All their celebrity has evaporated like the morning mist.

Look at verse 60, "Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you. This, this was the man, who made the earth tremble and who shook kingdoms. What were we scared of? What were we afraid of? What were we in awe of? He's just a shadow like the rest of us." Adam and Eve in the garden thought that by eating the fruit it would make them God and they ate the fruit and it brought death. Now we find in verse 11, this king's body lined with maggots as a mattress and worms as a covering and his spirit has gone to the far reaches of the pit. We learn three things about the underworld here from Isaiah. Number one: that the dead are not dead, they're alive in Sheol. Death is never the termination, death is only a change of address. Secondly, in Sheol there is personal continuity and recognition. These people recognize him, they see him, they know him, they recognize the king who arrives there. Thirdly Sheol is a place of weakness and a loss of all earthly powers. People are shadows of their former self. And this is a great reversal. You can read down the story. This is the man that made the world a desert. This is a man that did not let the prisoners go home. This is a man who had his own way but it's all gone. All gone. All gone in a moment.

Now you see we have a warning here, don't we, of the world system? The world system that regularly tries to encroach itself on the Christian consciousness and the Christian's behavior. In 1 John chapter 2, John says this to Christian people, he says, "Do not love the world and the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world and the world is passing away with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." There is no room for human pride in the presence of the Almighty. In the Anglican literature, there is an expression: down peacock's feathers, down peacock's feathers. That's it.

You know that solemn story in the New Testament of King Herod who refused to acknowledge God and one day he put on his royal robes and he took his seat upon the throne, delivered a great oration beautifully practiced and excellently delivered. The people are shouting, "The voice of a god and not a man," and immediately the Lord struck him down because he did not give God glory and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. This is the end of pride. It is to be brought low. God exalts the humble but he humbles the exalted.

You and I have every reason as believers to be encouraged by God's faithful word, especially in days when we find ourselves marginalized and misrepresented by the world's media, persecuted or pressured by the world's powerful, ridiculed or parroted by the world's elites, vilified and scandalized in the world's press. This world is passing away. This world is passing away and in the end it is the destiny of all those, and I say to you, if you are not a Christian presently, it is the destiny of you and all that you represent to finally find yourself like this king of Babylon in hell without a friend to pity you. It's a desperate picture, isn't it?

But God will be good to his church. We notice in the very middle of this oracle, God's promise that he will again choose Israel and set them in their own land and sojourners will be joining them and will attach themselves to the house of Jacob. You may join us, you may attach yourself to us, you may come to us as you come to Christ because, you see, Christ is the polar opposite of this king of Babylon. He did not need to exalt himself. He did not need to strive after or reach out for to attain deity or Godhood or exultation. He was in the beginning with God. He was forever face-to-face with God. He didn't have to reach for the power, it was his. Nor did he have to reach for the praise, it was all his. But what he did was what? He humbled himself. He did the reverse of this man. He humbled himself. He made himself a servant. He took on our humanity. He even let us kill him in order that you who are nobody, in order for you who are nothing, in order for you who are without hope and without God in the world, may in him one day be exalted so that where Jesus is, you will be also.

Let's pray.

Well Lord, we just pray that you would open our eyes to see, our minds to understand, our wills to do, our hearts to embrace, the truth that is in the Lord Jesus. We pray, Father, that you would be pleased to humble us if we're lifted up with pride, if we've begun to believe more about ourselves than is worthy. Keep us, we pray, close to you. Keep us so close to you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen