

**CALVARY PANDAN
BIBLE-PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 21

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

CHAPTER 21

Theme: "Watchman, what of the night!"

THEME VERSE

Isaiah 21:11-12 (KJV) "The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? 12 The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will inquire, inquire ye: return, come."

INTRODUCTION

The constant replacement of superpowers by another is the history of mankind. Man rules over man are the repeated theme throughout history. There is no abatement to this dastard deed where killings and atrocities always abound when a rising power subdues another dawning superpower. Such was the case of Babylon when it becomes fodder for the Medes and Persians.

When Isaiah made this prophecy about the rise of the Medo-Persian Empire, the Babylonian empire has yet to rise to full glory and might. The Medes and Persians were far from friendly with one another. They were at

that point in time a weak and insignificant people. To be prophesied as one of the major players in the conquest and dominance of the Middle Eastern Region was difficult if not impossible to believe at that time. It was like saying that America would one day rise to super power status and rule the world when the Mayflower landed on the shores of America in 1620! No one would believe that a few Christian pilgrims who fled from the persecution in Europe would spawn a nation of such might and greatness. Yet all that the LORD has prophesied about Babylon and the Medo-Persia came to pass exactly as God has said.

Not one word of the prophecies of the LORD failed. The LORD will always do what He deems best regardless of the believer or unbelief of sinful men. This is the might and power of God. He was not just revealing future events but rather He was revealing to His own children what He the heavenly Father will do in the future regarding their future! Chapter 21 of Isaiah is such a chapter to encourage the believers in a time of great idolatry in the divided kingdom of Israel, which will soon experience its first captivity by the Assyrians and her final destruction by the Babylonians soon after that.

OUTLINE

1. A Response to a Grievous Vision (vs.1-5);
2. The Grievous Vision Revealed (vs. 6-10);
3. A Call to Edom (vs. 11-12);

4. A Burden upon Arabia (vs. 13-17).

COMMENTARY

A Response to a Grievous Vision

Chapter 21 of Isaiah begins with a different burden. Instead of naming the city or nation as in previous cases, it describes the burden as “the burden of the desert of the sea”. This is a cryptic description of Babylon whose nation is also called Babylon. This capital city is located along the mighty rivers called Euphrates and Tigris. It appears as if many waters like the sea surround it. [See description of Babylon in Jeremiah -- **Jeremiah 51:13** “O thou that dwellest upon many waters, abundant in treasures, thine end is come, *and* the measure of thy covetousness.”; **Jeremiah 51:36** “Therefore thus saith the LORD; Behold, I will plead thy cause, and take vengeance for thee; and I will dry up her sea, and make her springs dry.”; Also River Nile -- **Isaiah 11:15** “And the LORD shall utterly destroy the tongue of the Egyptian sea; and with his mighty wind shall he shake his hand over the river, and shall smite it in the seven streams, and make *men* go over dryshod.”]

Babylon was a desert before she came into prominence and will become a desert again after the Medes come and destroy her in the not too distant future. The Medes will come very swiftly as it is described that she will come like the unstoppable whirlwinds from the south that will pass through Babylon. That the identity of this “whirlwinds” is not given until verse

2 is for impact. They will come from the south, which will be the Desert of Arabia. It is described as a terrible land i.e. dreadful land because of the cruel and vicious nature of her attacks and destruction.

What the LORD revealed to Isaiah was called a grievous i.e. a severe or cruel vision. It is always grievous each time a nation destroys another. The thousands and in some cases even millions are slaughtered in order to satiate the appetites of despot kings and princes. Their enlargement of territories bring with it untold destruction and deaths. The treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously i.e. the one who has dealt treacherously will now be dealt with treacherously. This is the just retribution of the LORD. The one who spoils will now be spoilt. The identities of the ones who will do so to the Babylonians were the Persians (also called Elam) and the Medes. Persia was called Elam because Elam was a prominent province of Persia that borders Media.

“All the sighing thereof have I made to cease” simply means that all the nations including Israel that came under the treacherous reign of the Babylonians had been crying for deliverance will now cease as the deliverance will soon arrive from the south. The manner in which the Babylonians ruled their vassal nations was to up root their best young men from family, culture and God so that they could be brainwashed to help the King of Babylon rule His subjects. Such was done to Daniel and his three

friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Families were returned and people were sent back to their homelands with their “gods” and moneys were given to rebuild their temples for worship during the reign of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Isaiah’s response was one of pain and grief. He said that his loins i.e. waist or small of his back were filled with pain. No matter how deserving is a wicked nation of the judgement sent by the LORD, the heart of the prophet of God must be tender and sorrowful when he witnesses the judgement. It is not about justice only but justice tempered with compassion and mercy. Pangs of sorrow have taken hold or seized Isaiah. He could not help himself but felt the deep sorrow coursing through every fibre of his body. He compared it to the pains of a woman about to give birth. It is said that the pain of a mother giving birth is the most excruciating pain on earth.

Isaiah said that he could not stand upright. He had to bow down like a hunchback upon hearing the prophecy from the LORD. He was dismayed i.e. he trembled inwardly upon seeing the prophecy with his eyes of faith. His heart panted i.e. beat very fast and fearfulness or horror affrighted him. Isaiah became terrified by the prophecy. The wrath of God upon a nation whom He used to punish Judah will be punished too for the cruelty and atrocities committed against God’s people. Isaiah’s night of pleasure has been turned into a night of fear by the LORD. After a hard day’s

work, it is common to relax at night in the comforts of one’s home. However, with this prophetic revelation, Isaiah said that the night of pleasure was replaced immediately by fear. It is indeed to be filled with horror in one’s own home where it was supposed to be a place of safety and consolation.

Verse 5 described what actually happened in Daniel 5. The King of Babylon was surrounded by the Medes and Persians and the great city of Babylon was about to be destroyed. However, the king of Babylon cared only for revelry, as Babylon had never fallen before until that fateful day. So filled with a false sense of security, the king of Babylon ordered that a watchman be set up to watch in the watchtower while the rest of the people feast in a drunken orgy with their deluded king. While they were feasting, the mighty walls of Babylon were breached and a call to arms was ordered hastily by the king of Babylon to all his princes. The phrase “anoint the shield” is to oil it to make it more protective from the arrows or swords of their enemies. This means to ready themselves for battle.

The Grievous Vision Revealed

The content of the grievous vision is explained in the next five verses. Isaiah was commanded by the LORD not to hide the vision but to declare it and be ready when the prophecy comes to pass. The LORD commanded Isaiah to go and set a watchman and let him declare when he seeth. In other words, Isaiah was to be that watchman and warn all of the impending judgement that would fall

upon Babylon and all the nations under her captivity. He has to declare all that is revealed to him by the LORD. He must be alert and watchful at all times. To slumber is to fail as a watchman. His mind must not be clouded by alcohol or activities that might dull his senses.

The first thing that Isaiah saw was “a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses and a chariot of camels.” Chariot represents speed and power of conquest. Chariots were like modern day tanks that can destroy the infantry. They could ride them down with ease. The first chariot had two riders, which probably points to two rulers leading the army. This could possibly be the kings of the Medes and Persians. Asses and camels were beasts of burdens for carry supplies to feed the armies. This means that the armies of the Medo-Persian Empire had with them plentiful supplies that were able to keep up with the marching army. Battles have been lost in history when the army runs ahead of their supplies. The soldiers could die of starvation, thirst or hunger. Worse still, they could run out of ammunition or fuel as in some modern warfare. In olden times, armies without food and water could be decimated. Verse 7 describes a marching army that is well organised and supplied with good logistics to feed their armies. Isaiah faithfully recorded all that he witnessed as he was commanded.

Isaiah cried in verse 8 that he saw a lion. This “lion” has to be Cyrus or Darius who would lead the charge against Babylon. The ferocity and

strength of the King of Medo-Persia is seen by the symbol of the lion. Isaiah then declares that he will remain on his watchtower and not slumber. He said that he stood continually upon the watchtower in the daytime and he was set in his ward i.e. post whole nights. Isaiah did not sleep throughout the night as he described to the Lord the diligence and seriousness he attended to his duties.

Isaiah witnessed a chariot of men this time. This is a figure to describe the armies that came with great speed and number likened to a chariot. The armies would be unstoppable. The phrase “a couple of horsemen” has to mean the two armies of the Medes and the Persians. They would come in great power and might. Then Isaiah answered as the watchman should and said that Babylon is fallen, is fallen. The repetition is to emphasize the certainty of the event. All the graven images that were the multiple gods of the Babylonians were broken i.e. crushed or broken to pieces on to the ground. This refers to a total destruction of the Babylonian Empire. She will never rise to superpower status ever again.

Verse 10 describes the people of Israel. “O my threshing and the corn of my floor” describes the devastation upon Israel by the Babylonians first and then the Babylonians would be devastated later. The ones whom the LORD would use to chastise Israel would in turn be punished in due course by a greater superpower. This was revealed to Isaiah and Isaiah said

that he has now revealed the same to Israel.

A Call to Edom

The attention shifts from Babylon to Israel to Edom. It was a burden to Dumah. Dumah means "silence". It refers to Edom as the next phrase reveals. Perhaps the LORD is saying that Edom will be silenced for what she did to God's people when they shouted "rase it rase it" as they watched Jerusalem burn. It is true that this will take place in the future but there is no love lost between Edom and God's people.

The next phrase used by the LORD was "Watchman, what of the night?" It means what time it was or what is the condition of Edom? Night time was the time of greatest danger as everyone would be sleeping compared to the day. Night time is the time when danger lurks and enemies attack. Night time is the time people slumber and the duty of the watchman is needed most. The repetition of the question emphasised the urgency of the request.

The reply of the watchman was "the morning cometh, and also the night; if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come." What it means is that morning i.e. safety or peace will soon come. However it is short lived as night will soon follow. There will be no escape for Edom is what the phrase means. If Edom will enquire of Isaiah then come and find out and do something about her condition. The only way out for Edom is to return i.e. turn to the LORD of Isaiah who is also the God of Israel in sincere

repentance. The word for come means to come to the LORD and accept Him as their Lord and Saviour. This is not the only way for Edom but for all Gentile nations. Man's rule and conquest of one another will never cease until the LORD returns to rule with an iron hand. Then only will man stop fighting with man and nations stop conquering other nations.

A Burden upon Arabia

The burden shifts from Edom to Arabia. The description of their plight was just as sombre and bleak. The Arabians were known to live in tents like as nomads and they were princes or sheiks. However the description of their abode here was that they will lodge in the forest. They do not live in the forest unless it was to hide from their enemies and because they were afraid. This is the right interpretation as these were not normal people but merchants who traded with the Dedanims. The Dedanims were descendants of Jokshan who was a descendant of Keturah, the concubine of Abraham (cf. Genesis 25:3). Ezra 27:15 said that the Dedanims were merchants who traded with many nations as they travelled across the Middle Eastern region and the Arabians were probably one of their many trade partners.

Verse 14 explains their plight in a deeper fashion. The inhabitants of the land of Tema brought water to him that was thirsty. Tema was one of the sons of Ishmael (cf. Genesis 25:15). The Arabians were thirsty and hungry as they lived in the forest. The inhabitants of the land of Tema gave

them water and food. The word “prevented” means “anticipated”. They gave them food as they anticipated their hunger living in the forest. The reason was that they fled from the swords, from the drawn swords and from bent bows and from the grievousness of war. To describe the swords as drawn and the bow as bent describe the severity of their plight. Their enemies were about to slaughter them when they fled for their life into the forest. There was no time to plan for logistics.

The timing of this destruction upon Arabia was exactly one year from the time of this prophecy. The year of the hireling points to the exact one year as the hireling waits patiently for the year to end so that he can get his wage. All the glory of Kedar shall fail. Kedar was one of the key and important cities in Arabia. A. S. Fulton said, “Of the Ishmaelite tribes, Kedar must have been one of the most important, and thus in later times the name came to be applied to all the wild tribes of the desert. It is through Kedar (Arabic, keidar) that Muslim genealogists trace the descent of Mohammed from Ishmael.” (ISBE, Swordsearcher 6.1) The destruction probably came during the time of the Assyrians when Israel was destroyed and Judah was nearly destroyed by Sennacherib. The young men and the residue of the number of archers and mighty men of the children of Kedar shall be diminished. These archers and mighty men were the backbone of any army. Here the LORD said that they will be reduced to few in numbers. The residue was reduced further. Their

power will be gone. The LORD God of Israel had spoken it. This is final and will surely come to pass.

PRACTICAL VALUE

All super powers will fail

No matter how powerful the nation of man is today, it will be gone tomorrow. It is a matter of time. There is no exception to this irrefutable rule of existence. The history of mankind attests to this fact and it is littered with nations that appears invincible but have disappeared from the face of the earth. Ruins of past glory remain but the might and pomp and splendour of the people are gone forever. The Angkor Wat is a clear example of this truth. The rise and fall of the empires in the Middle East as described in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel affirms this truth as well. The reason is that kings die. Their sons are never guaranteed to be as brilliant as their fathers who reigned supreme when the empire was at its height. These sons ruin the glory of their forefathers. That is how empires die and fall.

The only Kingdom that will remain forever must be ruled by a King who never dies. He will remain constant and rule forever with the same might, brilliance and justice. This person is none other than the Son of God, Jesus Christ. His kingdom will last for eternity as he is eternal and will never fade in His might and power and glory.

Jus Talionis is based upon the Sovereignty of God

The justice and the sovereignty of God demand that all evil and sin be punished. The punishment can be on earth or after this life. No one will ever escape the just judgement of God. The evil Babylonians will be punished by the evil Persians. The evil Persians will in turn be punished by the evil Greeks. The evil Greeks will in turn be punished by the evil Romans. This goes on and on until the LORD returns.

Every nation rises and falls according to God’s plan. The rise and fall of all kings and nations are in God’s hand alone and not in the hands of sinful man. Sinful man might delude himself into thinking that he is in control of his own destiny but he cannot even breathe one breath without God’s permission. Man is full of pride and darkness that he cannot see beyond his own nose. The just retribution of God was true then and it is still true today. Every believer can rest in his heart with the knowledge that no evil man will ever escape His heavenly Father who is God almighty.

Every believer is a watchman

A watchman is one who knows the truth of God as revealed in Holy Scriptures. This means that he has to be a believer. Every believer therefore is a watchman. He has no choice. When he tells someone that if he dies in his sin he goes to hell, he has just warned a sinner of his impending danger. He is a watchman. When a believer tells another believer of the dangers of the Neo-evangelical

Movement or Charismatic Movement or the Ecumenical Movement, he has just warned him of the spiritual danger that he could be in. He is a watchman.

The watchman cannot slumber or be drunk. He must always remain sober and watchful and be on alert. Many people depend on him to remain safe. He must sound the warning when impending danger arises. Many will die if he fails and allow the enemy to creep into the camp. Many depend on his vigilance as he stands his ground and watch with all alertness for the enemy may come any time without warning. AMEN.

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Isaiah 21:1-17

TUESDAY: Isaiah 21:1-17

WEDNESDAY: Isaiah 21:1-17

THURSDAY: Isaiah 21:1-17

FRIDAY: Isaiah 21:1-17

Discussion Questions

1. Do you see yourself as a watchman? Identify who are the ones who depend on your continuous vigilance.

2. To what extent would you be a watchman for the LORD in these last days? What would be in Isaiah's mind and heart that enabled him to stay alert day and night? Explain your answer.

3. Are you a good watchman? What are the marks of a good watchman?

4. How does a person become a good watchman? What are the marks of a slothful watchman?

5. Who are the watchmen in your church? Who will creep in nowadays when the watchmen fail the LORD and God's people?

6. How do you feel about Singapore knowing that it will go the way of all nations i.e. destruction and death?

7. What lessons can you learn from this chapter about God's Word and about yourself?
