LESSON 10

The Fall of the Morning Star

The Lord of Armies himself has planned it; therefore, who can stand in its way? It is his hand that is outstretched, so who can turn it back?

— Isaiah 14:27

Long before Babylon ruled anyone, the Lord announced its fall and wrote its king's funeral song, because the hand that raises nations is the hand that brings them down.

WHERE WE ARE

No date heads chapter 13. The pronouncements of chapters 13–23 are arranged by subject, and the one date in this lesson is 14:28, the year Ahaz died, about 715 BC. Assyria rules the world. Babylon is a restless province on the Euphrates whose kings keep rebelling against Assyria and shopping for allies, Judah among them. Babylon's own empire is nearly a century away. The question this passage answers: who decides which nations rise and which ones fall?

Introduction

PART TWO OF OUR STUDY OPENS WITH A LIST OF FOREIGN NATIONS. It helps to know what the list is for. Judah lived between giants, with Assyria to the northeast, Egypt to the southwest, and smaller kingdoms crowding every border. Each one was either a threat or a possible ally, and Judah's kings spent their reigns working out which was which. Chapters 13–23 go down that same map, name by name, and say what God has decided about each one.

The first name is a surprise. Isaiah doesn't start with Assyria, the empire that has already swallowed Damascus and Samaria. He starts with Babylon. In his day Babylon is a subject city under Assyria's thumb. Why open there?

Babylon was the city a Judean king might be tempted to trust. Merodach-baladan held its throne from 721 to 710 BC, seized it again briefly in 703, and recruited anyone who would stand with him against Assyria. Isaiah also knew where Jerusalem's treasures would finally end up: *carried off to Babylon*, 39:6.[88] And Babylon had stood for something since Genesis. It's where people first said, *Let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let's make a name for ourselves*, Genesis 11:4. Babylon is humanity trying to save itself without God.[89]

So, let's begin to answer the question we'll raise over the next several lessons: *who is running the world*?

The Day of the Lord (13:1–16)

A pronouncement concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw, 13:1. Then the oracle does something odd. It doesn't mention Babylon again until verse 19. A banner goes up on a bare hill, the signal for

troops to gather, 13:2. God speaks: *I have commanded my consecrated ones; yes, I have called my warriors,* 13:3. Nations gather with a roar, and *the Lord of Armies is mobilizing an army for war,* 13:4. The soldiers think they're marching for their own king. They've been drafted by God.

Wail! For the day of the Lord is near, 13:6. The day of the Lord is any day God steps into history to settle accounts. Hands go limp and faces flush with fear, like a woman in labor, 13:7–8.

Then the sky goes out. *Indeed, the stars of the sky and its constellations will not give their light. The sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shine,* 13:10. *Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will shake from its foundations,* 13:13.

Settle how to read this language now, because it comes back in chapters 24 and 34. Isaiah isn't forecasting an eclipse. He's reaching for the biggest words a Hebrew poet had to describe the collapse of a world power. When an empire falls, the lights go out for everyone who lived under it. Edward Young puts it plainly: the upheavals in nature don't demand a literal fulfillment, and the figures are there so we can see how great the judgment is.[90]

Commentators divide over how far these verses reach. Some keep them on Babylon's fall in 539 BC. Motyer and Gary Smith both hear in 13:6–16 the final Day at the end of history, with Babylon's fall as one early installment of it.[91] Both readings agree on what God is against. Verse 11 names it: *I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant and humiliate the insolence of tyrants.* Babylon is the case in front of Isaiah. God judges that pride in 539 BC, and He will judge it on the last day.

The Jewel of the Kingdoms (13:17–14:2)

Now the target comes into focus. *Look! I am stirring up the Medes against them, who cannot be bought off with silver and who have no desire for gold,* 13:17. The Medes were hill tribes in what's now western Iran, raided by Assyria at will in Isaiah's day. They'd join the Persians, and in 539 BC the Medes and Persians took Babylon. Daniel's account ends with *Darius the Mede* receiving the kingdom, Daniel 5:31.

Babylon, the jewel of the kingdoms, the glory of the pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them, 13:19. The Chaldeans were the southern tribes who gave Babylon its kings, Merodach-baladan among them. The city will be emptied. No nomad will pitch a tent there. Hyenas and jackals will howl in the palaces, 13:20–22.

It didn't happen in a night. Sennacherib of Assyria leveled Babylon in 689 BC, and it was rebuilt. Cyrus took it in 539 with hardly a fight, and it went on as a living city. It was broken by stages after that, under later kings and later empires, until the site was a field of mounds in the desert.[92] It took centuries, and it happened. God announces it while Babylon is still on the way up: *Babylon's time is almost up; her days are almost over,* 13:22.

Why should Judah care? Because Babylon's fall is Judah's release. *For the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will choose Israel again,* 14:1. *The resident alien,* the foreigner living among them, *will join them and be united with the house of Jacob.* The captors become the captives, 14:2. The return from exile after 539 looked nothing like this. Cyrus sent the exiles home because it suited his policy. The promise reaches past that return to a people of God gathered out of every nation through the gospel.[93]

Shining Morning Star (14:3–23)

When the Lord gives you rest from your pain, torment, and the hard labor you were forced to do, 14:3. That's the language of Egypt, hard labor and then rest. On that day God's people will sing *this song of contempt about the king of Babylon*, 14:4. It's a mock funeral song.

The earth sings first. *How the oppressor has quieted down*, 14:4. *The whole earth is calm and at rest*, 14:7. The trees join in: *Even the cypresses and the cedars of Lebanon rejoice over you: "Since you have been laid low, no lumberjack has come against us,"* 14:8. Conquerors stripped Lebanon for siege works and palaces.

Then Sheol, the realm of the dead. *Sheol below is eager to greet your coming*, 14:9. The dead kings of the nations rise from their thrones, and they have one line for him: *You too have become as weak as we are; you have become like us!* 14:10. *Maggots are spread out under you, and worms cover you*, 14:11. This is poetry, and it shouldn't be read as a map of the afterlife. Judah needed the plainer point: the king they were tempted to lean on would end up a corpse like everyone else.

Then the heavens. *Shining morning star, how you have fallen from the heavens! You destroyer of nations, you have been cut down to the ground*, 14:12. The morning star is Venus, the brightest light at dawn, which Israel's neighbors worshiped as a god. Listen to what the king told himself:

I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the gods' assembly, in the remotest parts of the North. I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High, 14:13–14.

Five times he says *I will*. The mountain in the north was where the Canaanites said their gods met in council. Ruling the earth wasn't enough for him. He wanted to be equal with the Most High. The serpent made Eve the same offer: *you will be like God*, Genesis 3:5.

But you will be brought down to Sheol into the deepest regions of the Pit, 14:15. That's where his climb ends.

Last, the passersby. *Is this the man who caused the earth to tremble, who shook the kingdoms?* 14:16. Other kings lie in splendid tombs. This one is *thrown out without a grave, like a worthless branch*, 14:19. Set that beside 11:1. The King God raises is a shoot from the stump of Jesse. This king is a branch nobody wants.[94]

Which king is it? Scholars have proposed half a dozen, from Tiglath-pileser to Nabonidus, and Isaiah never says. Motyer thinks the silence is deliberate. The description fits any of the ancient empire builders, and the point is how God governs all of them.[95]

Many people know this passage by another name. The King James Version rendered *shining morning star* as *Lucifer*, a Latin word meaning light-bearer, and from Tertullian onward readers have taken verses 12–15 as the fall of Satan. The passage won't carry it. The song is addressed to *the king of Babylon*, 14:4. Verse 16 calls him *the man*. He dies, rots, and lies unburied, and Satan does none of those things.[96] His pride may look like the devil's. The song is still about a man.

God closes the song in His own voice. *"I will rise up against them"—this is the declaration of the Lord of Armies*, 14:22. He will *cut off from Babylon her reputation, remnant, offspring, and posterity*, and He will

sweep her away with the broom of destruction, 14:22–23. The king said *I will* five times. Now God says it, and what He says happens.

The Hand Stretched Out (14:24–32)

Isaiah turns now to an enemy his hearers could see. *The Lord of Armies has sworn: As I have purposed, so it will be; as I have planned it, so it will happen. I will break Assyria in my land; I will tread him down on my mountain*, 14:24–25.

Babylon's fall was more than a century and a half off. Assyria's defeat in Judah was close enough to watch. In 701 BC Sennacherib's army surrounded Jerusalem, and in one night the angel of the Lord struck down 185,000 of them, 37:36. Assyria was broken in God's land, on God's mountain, as He had sworn. This short oracle is a down payment. A man who watched Assyria collapse outside his own walls had every reason to believe what Isaiah said about Babylon.[97]

This is the plan prepared for the whole earth, and this is the hand stretched out against all the nations, 14:26. Then the verse at the top of this lesson: *The Lord of Armies himself has planned it; therefore, who can stand in its way? It is his hand that is outstretched, so who can turn it back?* 14:27.

The chapter closes with one more pronouncement: *In the year that King Ahaz died*, 14:28, about 715 BC. Philistia hears that a rod which beat it has been broken, and celebrates. *Don't rejoice, all of you in Philistia*, 14:29. Something worse is coming out of the same root.

Verse 32 asks a question. *What answer will be given to the messengers from that nation?* 14:32. Philistine envoys have come looking for a partner against Assyria. Isaiah hands Hezekiah, the new king, his reply: *The Lord has founded Zion, and his oppressed people find refuge in her.* Judah didn't need Philistia. It had the Lord.

Looking to Christ

No apostle quotes Isaiah 13–14. Two of its themes still turn up in the New Testament.

The first is Babylon. Long after the city on the Euphrates had dwindled to a ruin, John saw it fall again: *It has fallen, Babylon the Great has fallen! She has become a home for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit*, Revelation 18:2. The haunted ruin is Isaiah's picture from 13:21–22. John gives the old name to Rome and every power like it.

The second is the morning star. The king of Babylon said, *I will make myself like the Most High*, and fell. Paul describes Jesus, *who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited*, Philippians 2:6. The king climbed and was thrown down. Christ came down. *He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted him*, 2:8–9. And at the end of the Bible Jesus takes the title the king lost: *I am the Root and descendant of David, the bright morning star*, Revelation 22:16.

Applying the Text

Read the news with 14:27 open. Assyria looked permanent in Isaiah's day. Babylon's empire, when it finally came, lasted less than ninety years. The powers that fill the headlines now are on the same leash. You don't have to be afraid of them. The plan for the whole earth is already settled, 14:26.

Listen for the king's *I will* in your own plans. Few people say it aloud. It shows up as a plan that leaves God out, or as the assumption that you'd run things better than He does. God's complaint in 13:11 is pride, and Jesus said it in one line: *everyone who exalts himself will be humbled*, Luke 14:11.

Don't lean on Babylon. Judah was tempted to trust Babylon because Babylon was against Assyria. Your Babylon may be an employer, a political movement, a retirement balance, or a person who seems strong enough to carry you. Any of them can help. None of them can save you, and every one of them will someday be as weak as the rest of us.

Remember that the grave levels everyone. *You too have become as weak as we are.* The most powerful man of his age walked into Sheol, and the dead weren't impressed. Live now the way you'll wish you had lived when that's true of you.

Have Hezekiah's answer ready. Someone will offer you a way out of trouble that only works if you set your faith aside for a while. 14:32 is the reply. God founded Zion, and His people find refuge there, which today means Christ and the congregation He's put you in. Is that where you're looking?

For Discussion

1. Babylon isn't named in chapter 13 until verse 19. Read 13:2–16 and list what God says He is against. Who besides Babylon could fit that description?

2. Write out the five *I will* statements in 14:13–14. What does each one reach for, and how does God's answer in 14:22–23 match them?

3. Why would a king of Judah be tempted to trust Babylon in Isaiah's day? What does the scene in Sheol (14:9–11) say to that temptation?

4. Many people have read 14:12–15 as the fall of Satan. What in the passage itself points to a human king? Why does it matter that we read it the way Isaiah wrote it?

5. Where do you hear the king of Babylon's *I will* in your own plans right now? What would it cost you to give it up?

6. Isaiah told Judah it didn't need Philistia's alliance (14:32). What are you counting on to keep you safe that you've never actually asked God about?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 11: No Refuge in the Nations (Isaiah 15–20)

Moab weeps on its rooftops, Damascus becomes a heap of rubble, and Egypt's wise men run out of advice. Isaiah goes stripped and barefoot for three years to make a point about trusting Egypt. And in chapter 19 stands one of the most startling promises in the Old Testament: an altar to the Lord in the land of Egypt.

Before you come: read Isaiah 15–20. Keep the *Kings and the Nations* page open, and mark every place where a nation looks for help and doesn't find it.

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[88] Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 61. On 13:1 he gives several reasons Babylon heads the list of nations: it dominated the culture of Isaiah's world, it epitomized worldly glory and so could stand for the world itself, it fomented rebellion against Assyria at every opportunity so that Ahaz's successors might be tempted to look to it for help, and Isaiah knew that Babylon would be the power that destroyed Jerusalem.

[89] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 128–129. On 13:1 he argues that Babylon was the more significant candidate for superpower status than Assyria, and that since humanity's bid to organize life and find security without reference to God began at Shinar/Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), the name typifies humankind's will to be its own savior.
[90] Young, *Isaiah*, 1:424–425. On 13:13 he holds that the upheavals in nature do not necessarily demand a literal fulfillment; through such figures of speech Isaiah lets the reader perceive how great the coming judgment will be.
[91] Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 300. On 13:6–16 he argues that the Day of the Lord here is generic and introduces all the oracles of chapters 13–23, and that while some Day of the Lord passages concern near historical judgments, this one points to the eschatological era. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 131, on 13:17–22, observes that the Old Testament typically sets a coming historical calamity against the backdrop of the final one, so that the fall of Babylon is read against the Last Day.
[92] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 132. On 13:19–22 he notes that Assyria destroyed Babylon in 689 BC but the city recovered, that it was still intact after Cyrus captured it in 539 BC, and that a later Persian king, Darius Hystaspes, desolated it after further revolts.
[93] Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 62. On 14:1–4a he argues that the promise is best taken as a reference to the new Israel of God, the church of Christ, conquering the nations through the power of the gospel. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 133, adds that the return from Babylon in no way fulfilled 14:1–2, since Cyrus acted from self-interest and there was no reversal of captor and captive; the return was only a pale reflection and a pledge of what was promised.
[94] Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 316–317. On 14:19 he contrasts the dishonorable burial of the king, a "rejected, loathed" branch, with the messianic shoot of 11:1, who is full of the Spirit and will rule the nations in justice. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 137, makes the same link through the Hebrew word for branch, which is the one used in 11:1.
[95] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 134. On 14:4b–6 he says there is no point asking which king Isaiah has in mind, since the description is standard for the totalitarian rulers of the ancient empires and the aim is to show principles of God's government of history. Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 310–311, surveys the proposals (Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Merodach-baladan, Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, or a symbolic tyrant) and himself sets the lament in the years before 701 BC, when Merodach-baladan courted Hezekiah (39:1–8); on 14:9–11 (314) he draws the lesson for Judah that so weak a king could never save them from Assyria.
[96] Young, *Isaiah*, 1:441. On 14:12 he notes that Tertullian, Gregory the Great, and others referred the verse to the fall of Satan (Luke 10:18), but argues that the passage describes the end of a tyrant's reign and his descent to Sheol, and so cannot apply to Satan. Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 62, likewise says that "Lucifer" is the king of Babylon and not Satan. Motyer, *Isaiah*, 136, adds that the title alludes to a Canaanite myth of a god who tried to seize the heights and failed, used the way the Old Testament uses such allusions, without granting the characters any reality.
[97] Motyer, *Isaiah*, 138. On 14:24–27 he argues that the Lord commits Himself in advance to deal with Assyria as a test case: in 701 BC Isaiah's hearers would see God's hand in their own deliverance, and seeing what happened to Assyria they could believe what was promised about Babylon and, beyond Babylon, about the Day of the Lord.