

Isaiah – Chapter 23

Tyre

Isaiah 23:11, 15, 17 - He has stretched His hand out over the sea, He has made the kingdoms tremble; The LORD has given a command concerning Canaan to demolish its strongholds. ... Now in that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years like the days of one king. At the end of seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the harlot: ... It will come about at the end of seventy years that the LORD will visit Tyre. Then she will go back to her harlot's wages and will play the harlot with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.

CONTEXT

Isaiah 23 forms the climactic conclusion to the Oracles Against the Nations in Isaiah 13-23. It is the tenth and final “burden” (or oracle) in this carefully arranged section. The unit opens with Babylon, the great land-based imperial power (Chapters 13-14), and closes with Tyre, the preeminent maritime commercial power of the ancient world. Together they represent the full spectrum of human strength, wealth, and self-reliance that God will judge.

This placement is deliberate. After the specific national judgments, Isaiah 24 immediately universalizes everything: the Lord will lay waste “the earth” itself. Chapter 23 thus serves as the bridge from particular oracles to cosmic judgment. It also sits right after the oracle against Jerusalem itself (ch. 22, “the valley of vision”), creating a powerful literary movement: foreign nations → God’s own city → another foreign power → the whole world. No one escapes the reach of the Holy One of Israel.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF TYRE

Tyre (Hebrew *Tzor*, “rock”) was the leading city of ancient Phoenicia, located on the Mediterranean coast in what is now southern Lebanon, roughly 20-25 miles north of the modern Israel-Lebanon border. It consisted of a mainland settlement (“Old Tyre”) and a heavily fortified island city about half a mile offshore. This dual geography made it exceptionally defensible and strategically vital for maritime trade. Tyre was renowned for shipbuilding, seafaring expertise, the production of Tyrian purple dye (from murex snails, a luxury item associated with royalty), and skilled craftsmanship in wood, stone, and metal.

Early Biblical Connections:

Tyre had close but mixed relations with Israel. King Hiram (Hiram) of Tyre supplied cedar logs, skilled laborers, and sailors to David for his palace (2 Samuel 5:11) and especially to Solomon for the temple and royal projects (1 Kings 5:1-18, 9:11-14; 2 Chronicles 2:3-16). They shared a covenant of “brotherhood” (Amos 1:9). Later, King Ahab of Israel married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal (Ithobaal), king of Sidon/Tyre (1 Kings 16:31), which transgressed with aggressive Baal worship into the northern kingdom.

Isaiah – Chapter 23

Tyre

Isaiah's Lifetime (740-680 BC):

During the 8th century BC, Tyre was at the height of its commercial power as the hub of a vast Phoenician trading network with colonies and outposts across the Mediterranean (Tarshish refers to far-western ports, probably in Spain). Isaiah 23 portrays Tyre as “the market of nations,” “the bestower of crowns,” whose “merchants were princes” and “traders were the honored of the earth.”

Assyrian imperial expansion put increasing pressure on the Phoenician cities. There was a significant Assyrian siege of Tyre around 724-720 BC under Shalmaneser V (roughly contemporary with the fall of Samaria in 722 BC). King Luli (Elulaios) of Tyre/Sidon resisted Assyrian domination. Tyre ultimately became a vassal but retained considerable autonomy and wealth. Isaiah's oracle against Tyre fits this period of Assyrian judgment on Phoenician pride and commercial self-reliance.

The Near Future After Isaiah

- Babylonian Period: After the fall of Assyria and Jerusalem (586 BC), Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon laid siege to Tyre for 13 years (586–573 BC). He conquered and devastated the mainland city but could not capture the island fortress. Much of Tyre's wealth and population shifted to the island. (This is recorded by Josephus and forms the backdrop for Ezekiel's detailed prophecies.)
- Persian Period: Tyre submitted to Cyrus the Great around 539 BC and became a Persian vassal, contributing ships to the Persian navy.
- Hellenistic Conquest: The most dramatic event was Alexander the Great's siege in 332 BC. After Tyre refused to submit, Alexander constructed a massive causeway (mole) from the mainland to the island, using rubble, stones, and timber from the destroyed old mainland city of Tyre. After seven months of intense fighting, he captured the island, killed or enslaved much of the population, and resettled the site. This event is widely recognized as a striking historical fulfillment of key details in Ezekiel 26 (many nations, scraping the city bare like the top of a rock, using its own stones against it) and is alluded to in Zechariah 9:3-4.

Later, Tyre continued under Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Roman control. It remained a significant port city into the New Testament era (Jesus ministered in the region of Tyre and Sidon; Paul sailed from there). The site is still inhabited today as the modern city of Sur in Lebanon, though its ancient glory as an independent maritime superpower is not current.

Biblically, Tyre represents a powerful Gentile trading partner and occasional adversary of Israel, one whose wealth, strategic location, and pride repeatedly drew prophetic attention.

Isaiah – Chapter 23

Tyre

Prophetic Significance:

Isaiah 23 is the shortest and most poetic of the major Tyre oracles. It is a lament that emphasizes the ripple effects of Tyre's fall on trading partners (ships of Tarshish, Sidon, Egypt), uses "harlot" imagery for Tyre's commercial dealings, includes the striking 70-year period followed by a divine visitation, and ends with the remarkable note that Tyre's profits will ultimately be "set apart to the Lord" for those who dwell in His presence.

Primary Comparison:

Ezekiel 26–28 Ezekiel delivers the most extensive and detailed judgment on Tyre (three full chapters, dated around 586 BC).

- Similarities: Both condemn Tyre's pride in wealth, beauty, commerce, and self-sufficiency. Both anticipate historical judgment through successive empires (Nebuchadnezzar on the mainland; Alexander on the island). Both use poetic and lament forms. Ezekiel 26 explicitly notes Tyre's rejoicing over Jerusalem's fall as a motive for judgment.
- Key Contrasts:
 - Length and Focus: Isaiah 23 is concise and emphasizes the lament of the trading world plus the surprising future sanctification of wealth. Ezekiel 26 details the siege mechanics ("many nations," walls broken, houses destroyed); Ezekiel 27 is a magnificent dirge portraying Tyre as a splendid but doomed merchant ship loaded with goods from every nation; Ezekiel 28 contains two oracles against the "prince/king" of Tyre, including highly including one tied to Satan.
 - Tone on the Future: Isaiah 23 allows for a future "visitation" by the Lord and the use of Tyre's commercial gains. Ezekiel repeatedly states that Tyre "will be no more forever" (26:21, 27:36, 28:19), which I will wait for a future discussion.
 - Spiritual Depth: Ezekiel 28 adds a cosmic dimension absent from Isaiah 23; the pride of Tyre's ruler mirrors the original fall in heaven.

Other Prophetic Passages

- Amos 1:9–10: Condemns Tyre for breaking the "covenant of brotherhood" by handing whole communities of Israelites over to Edom as slaves. Judgment: fire on the walls.
- Joel 3:4–8: Tyre and Sidon judged for taking Judeans captive and selling them to the Greeks; God promises reversal (their own people sold to the Sabeans).
- Zechariah 9:2–4 (post-exilic, in a Messianic context): Tyre built a rampart and heaped up silver and gold like dust, but the Lord will dispossess her, cast her wealth into the

Isaiah – Chapter 23

Tyre

sea, and devour her with fire. This aligns well with Alexander's use of the old city's stones for the causeway, but there may be other implications as well.

- Jeremiah 25:22, 47:4: Tyre included in the cup of God's wrath against the nations and linked with the Philistines.
- New Testament: Jesus uses Tyre and Sidon in a comparative judgment saying (Matthew 11:21–22; Luke 10:13–14): it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for the Galilean cities that rejected greater revelation. The region also shows positive faith responses (the Syrophenician woman in Matthew 15 and Mark 7).

Isaiah 23 is distinctive among these for its judgment and reemergence. Also, its integration into larger themes of pride humbled and resources ultimately serving God's purposes.

Synthesis of Tyre in Eschatological Prophecies

Tyre functions in Scripture as a powerful archetype of proud, wealthy, commercial Gentile power that exalts itself against God. Its story carries both severe warning and surprising hope.

Judgment Archetype

Tyre embodies the “city of man” built on commerce, luxury, maritime strength, and self-glory; the same manner condemned in Isaiah 2:12–16 (ships of Tarshish judged). Revelation 18 draws heavily on the imagery of Ezekiel 27 and Isaiah 23: merchants weeping from afar, the harlot/commercial system judged, luxury destroyed. Tyre prefigures the final world economic-religious system that opposes God and will be utterly humbled.

Redemptive and Kingdom Purpose

The most distinctive eschatological note comes in Isaiah 23:18: after judgment and the 70-year period, Tyre's “gain and her harlot's wages will be set apart to the Lord” and will provide “sufficient food and choice attire for those who dwell in the presence of the Lord.”

This directly anticipates the great eschatological vision of Isaiah 60:5–9, where “the wealth of the nations shall come to you” (Zion), including the ships of Tarshish bringing silver and gold to beautify the house of the Lord. The same theme appears in Isaiah 66:12, 18–21. In the future Messianic Kingdom, even the commercial output and resources of former pagan powers like Tyre are sanctified and repurposed for the worship of God and the provision of His people.

The Oracle Concerning Tyre (1a)

The chapter begins with the familiar prophetic heading: “The oracle concerning Tyre.” The word “oracle” (*massa* ’) carries the idea of a burden that is lifted up and carried to its destination, a weighty message of divine judgment. This is the tenth and final oracle in the series of judgments against the nations (Isaiah 13–23). By placing Tyre last, Isaiah brackets the entire section with Babylon (chs. 13–14) at the beginning and Tyre at the end. Babylon represents the great land-based imperial power; Tyre represents the pinnacle of maritime commercial power. Together they demonstrate that no expression of human strength or glory escapes the sovereign hand of the Lord of hosts.

The Wailing of the Trading Partners (1b–6)

The oracle immediately launches into a lament addressed to the ships of Tarshish. These vessels, which sailed the farthest reaches of the known world, are told to wail because Tyre, their home port and commercial hub, has been destroyed. The city is left “without house or harbor.” News of the catastrophe reaches them from Cyprus (Kittim), the first major-island stop on the westward trade routes. The shock ripples outward.

The inhabitants of the coastland and the merchants of Sidon (Tyre’s sister Phoenician city) are told to be silent. Sidon had long been closely linked with Tyre commercially and politically. The once-bustling sea lanes are now quiet. Verse 3 highlights Tyre’s former economic dominance: the grain of the Nile (Shihor) and the harvest of the river supplied her revenue, and she functioned as “the market of nations.” Her wealth was built on controlling and facilitating trade between Egypt, Israel and the surrounding nations, and the broader Mediterranean world.

Verse 4 intensifies the lament by personifying the sea itself. The sea, which had been Tyre’s great protector and source of livelihood, now speaks like a woman who has never travailed or given birth. The fortified island city that seemed so secure has become like a barren woman, stripped of her children (her trading fleet and colonial outposts). When the report reaches Egypt, even that ancient power will be in anguish, because Tyre’s fall disrupts the entire regional economy.

The call in verse 6 to “pass over to Tarshish” and wail is ironic. Those who once sailed confidently to distant colonies are now told to flee to the very ends of their trade network in mourning. The judgment is not merely local; it shakes the entire commercial world that depended on Tyre.

The Depth of Tyre’s Former Glory and Present Humbling (7–8)

Isaiah now turns to address Tyre directly with a series of rhetorical questions that expose the depth of her fall. “Is this your jubilant city, whose origin is from antiquity, whose feet used to carry her to colonize distant places?” Tyre prided herself on her ancient roots and

Tyre

her far-flung colonial enterprise. She was no upstart; she had a long and illustrious history.

Verse 8 presses further: “Who has planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth?” Tyre did not merely trade, she crowned kings and elevated her merchants to princely status. Her commercial elite moved in the highest circles of international influence. The fall of such a city is shocking precisely because of how exalted she had become in the eyes of the world.

The Divine Author of the Judgment (9–11)

The answer to the question “who has planned this?” is given with unmistakable clarity: “The Lord of hosts has planned it.” This is the theological center of the first half of the chapter. The same sovereign God who raised up Assyria as the rod of His anger (Isaiah 10) has now decreed the humbling of Tyre.

His purpose is explicit: “to defile the pride of all beauty, to despise all the honored of the earth.” The word for “pride” here (*ga’on*) is the same term Isaiah uses throughout the book for the arrogant self-exaltation that God opposes (see Isaiah 2:11–17, 13:11, 14:11). Tyre’s beauty, wealth, and international honor are not neutral; they had become the occasion for pride that displaced trust in the Lord. God’s judgment is therefore not capricious but purposeful, God will actively oppose human self-glorification.

Verse 10 pictures the once-ordered commercial system thrown into chaos: “Overflow your land like the Nile, O daughter of Tarshish, there is no more restraint.” The normal structures that channeled and protected trade have collapsed. Verse 11 reinforces divine sovereignty: the Lord has stretched out His hand over the sea, made kingdoms tremble, and given a command concerning Canaan to demolish its strongholds. Even the sea, which had been Tyre’s greatest defense, is under His command.

The Specific Word to Sidon and the Historical Illustration (12–14)

Verse 12 addresses the “crushed virgin daughter of Sidon.” The once-proud and untouched city is told she will exult no more. Even if she flees to Cyprus, she will find no rest. The judgment is thorough.

Verse 13 provides a sobering historical illustration. The land of the Chaldeans (Babylon) had once been insignificant— “this is the people which was not.” Yet Assyria had allocated it for desert creatures and then turned it into a military power that erected siege towers, stripped palaces, and turned cities into ruins. The point is clear: if God could raise up and use even the Chaldeans as instruments of judgment, He can certainly bring down the proud and seemingly invincible city of Tyre.

Tyre

The section closes in verse 14 with the refrain that opened the lament: “Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for your stronghold is destroyed.” The commercial empire that appeared unassailable has fallen under the decree of the Lord of hosts.

The Seventy Years and the Lord’s Future Visitation (15–18)

The tone shifts dramatically in the final section. “Now in that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years like the days of one king.” The seventy-year period deliberately echoes the length of Judah’s Babylonian exile (Jeremiah 25:11–12, 29:10). Tyre’s judgment will parallel the experience of God’s own people in duration and severity. She will be “forgotten” as a major power.

At the end of those seventy years, something unexpected happens: “It will happen to Tyre as in the song of the harlot.” The imagery is striking. Tyre is personified as a forgotten prostitute who must once again take up her harp, walk about the city, and sing many songs in order to be remembered. The “harlot” language is not primarily moral but commercial. Throughout Scripture, harlotry imagery is often used for covenant unfaithfulness or for nations that sell themselves economically and politically to other powers for gain (Nahum 3:4; Revelation 17–18). Tyre’s “prostitution” was her willingness to trade and ally with any kingdom for profit.

Verse 17 then states that at the end of the seventy years “the Lord will visit Tyre.” This visitation leads to a resumption of her commercial activity—she will “go back to her harlot’s wages and will play the harlot with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.” The judgment is real and severe, but it is not the final word.

The most remarkable statement comes in verse 18: “Her gain and her harlot’s wages will be set apart to the Lord; it will not be stored up or hoarded, but her gain will become sufficient food and choice attire for those who dwell in the presence of the Lord.”

This is the theological high point of the chapter and one of the most surprising notes in the entire oracles-against-the-nations section. What had been the engine of Tyre’s pride and self-sufficiency will one day be consecrated. The commercial profits that once fed arrogance will instead sustain those who live before the Lord. This statement looks forward to the great eschatological vision of Isaiah 60, where the wealth of the nations—including the ships of Tarshish—flows to Zion for the glory of God and the beautification of His house. It also anticipates the broader theme in Isaiah 56–66 that the best of what the nations produce will ultimately serve the purposes of God’s kingdom.

“In that day” – we have come to understand that this is an eschatological reference. But there is an issue here. The day of the Lord begins with seven years of judgment followed by the peaceful Messianic Kingdom.

There are a few possibilities that have been proposed, but I will give you my theory. I am, however, willing to hear out any other possibilities.

Isaiah – Chapter 23

Tyre

From the perspective of Isaiah (and all other prophets), Tyre will be destroyed and no longer be prominent on the world's stage.

After the seventy years does not mean that Tyre will be an economic power immediately after the seventy years, but at some future point. In that day does not refer to Tyre's destruction but the reemergence.

During the seven years of tribulation, Tyre will be a nation of great wealth but that will be used as tribute to the Messiah and Israel after the Kingdom inauguration.

Summary of the Chapter's Message

Isaiah 23 proclaims that even the most powerful, wealthy, and strategically secure Gentile commercial empire is under the sovereign decree of the Lord of hosts. Tyre's pride in her antiquity, her trade networks, her merchants-as-princes status, and her island defenses could not protect her. The same God who judges Babylon also judges Tyre.

Yet the chapter refuses to end in unrelieved judgment. After a period of humbling that parallels Judah's own exile, the Lord visits Tyre, and her commercial strength is redirected. What once served human glory will one day serve those who dwell in the presence of the Lord. This is consistent with Isaiah's larger message: God humbles the proud, but He also has redemptive purposes that extend beyond Israel to encompass the nations, even former adversaries like Tyre.

For the original audience in Judah, the message was clear: do not place your trust in political or commercial alliances with powerful neighbors. The Lord alone is your security. For later readers—and for us—the chapter stands as both a warning against the pride of worldly wealth and achievement, and a remarkable statement of hope that even the resources of this world can be sanctified and used for the glory of God and the good of His people in His coming kingdom.

The Prophetic Mosaic: The Emerging Glory of the Holy One (Isaiah 1–23)

The Book of Isaiah functions as a "Prophetic Mosaic"—a non-linear assembly of theological "tiles." Chapters 1–23 establish God's identity as the "Holy One of Israel," moving from a legal case against a rebellious nation to the specific promise of a Divine King.



Tiles of Indictment and Holiness
(Chapters 1–6)

Tiles of the Coming King
(Chapters 7–23)

The Vision of the Thrice-Holy King
Supporting Detail: Isaiah sees the Lord on a lofty throne, surrounded by burning seraphim crying "Holy, Holy, Holy."

The Parable of the Worthless Vineyard
Supporting Detail: Israel is depicted as a tenderly tended vineyard that produced only wild, sour grapes of injustice.

The Holy Seed in the Stump
Supporting Detail: Though the nation is "cut down" by judgment, a faithful remnant remains like a living seed.

Immanuel: God With Us
Supporting Detail: A virgin conceives a son whose name serves as a sign of God's presence and covenant fidelity.

The Branch of Peace
Supporting Detail: A righteous shoot rises from a dead royal line to restore harmony between predators and prey.

The Sovereign of the Nations
Supporting Detail: God issues "burdens" against world powers like Babylon and Tyre, proving He rules every earthly empire.