

Isaiah 21 Handout

Last week in chapters 19 and 20 we studied the oracle against the nation of Egypt. We saw divine judgment will come on them, exposing the emptiness of human wisdom and political alliances. However, the chapter ends with a surprising promise: Egypt will one day turn to the Lord, be healed and join Assyria and Israel in worship as one people under God's blessing. Chapter 20 reinforced this message through a shocking act—Isaiah would walk barefoot and stripped for three years to warn Egypt and Cush, both of whom Judah was tempted to trust. They themselves will be led away and taken captive by Assyria. Isaiah's act exposes the shame of misplaced hope and calls God's people to rely on the Lord alone rather than human powers. We learned from these two chapters that God humbles nations to expose false hope, but His ultimate purpose is redemption—inviting even former enemies into His plan.

Chapter 21 contains a series of judgments announcing the fall of proud and trusted powers. Together, they call God's people to watchfulness. The chapter urges Judah not to place confidence in nations or appearances, but to remain alert, discerning and hopeful in the Lord alone.

Verse 1

Who does it say this prophecy is against? _____

This title involves contradictory ideas to make its point. Although Babylon appears powerful, it is spiritually a 'desert', empty before God's judgment.

This title given seems to be describing a desolate, vulnerable place.

This prophecy comes like a whirlwind sweeping through. It pictures a powerful, unstoppable, chaotic force coming against them.

Most scholars agree that the "invader" is the Medes (and later the Persians) who actually conquered Babylon around 539BC.

So, why the second oracle against Babylon? This second oracle is thought to be about 25-30 years after the first one given in Isaiah 13-14. Back then, Babylon was on the rise, but not yet dominant and was being spoken of as a future threat. Now they are a real political player and a tempting ally for Judah. Isaiah isn't just repeating what he said back in chapters 13 and 14. He is showing the same judgment, but from a different angle, for a different purpose and a different audience. This second oracle reassures the people that what God had foretold would actually happen.

Verse 2

What does Isaiah say has been shown to him? _____

We see a shift here with how the message was received, experienced and felt. This is the only oracle in chapters 13-23 where Isaiah is given a vision as part of the message.

There is thought to be several reasons for this shift:

- To emphasize intensity and immediacy
- To show the burden on the prophet

- To mark the cosmic scale of the event
- To heighten watchfulness and urgency
- To distinguish this oracle from others

This shift from prophecy to vision draws the reader into a watchful, sober engagement rather than just detached listening.

God is calling on foreign nations to rise up and attack Babylon.

What two nations does He call? _____

Elam was a part of the Persian Empire. God says He will bring an end to all the groaning that Babylon caused. All of the nations that Babylon oppressed will finally find relief.

Verse 3-4

These verses show us Isaiah's personal anguish over what is to happen. He is overwhelmed by the vision of judgment that he sees, so much so that he experiences physical and emotional pain. It seems that the pain was not just symbolic, but was something Isaiah actually felt, highlighting the severity of the judgment. Usually night is a time of rest and relief. Instead, it brings terror.

Verses 5

Verse 5 shifts the focus to Babylon and the impending attack.

What are the people doing? _____

Isaiah warns them to get up and oil their shields. In other words, prepare for battle. This idea that they are feasting highlights Babylon's false security and pride. This is the Babylonian pride we see in Daniel 5 centuries later. There Belshazzar throws an extravagant feast, drinking from the temple vessels. Suddenly a mysterious hand writes on the wall, signaling God's judgment. Babylon ends up falling that very night to the Medes and Persians. Many scholars and commentators see the events in Daniel 5 as fulfilling the prophecy talked about here.

Verses 6-9

Verse 6 shifts to Judah.

What does God command Isaiah to do in verse 6? _____

Have him report what he sees. Some scholars suggest this watchman was actually Isaiah himself. This watchman is posted for Judah, to report the fate of Babylon. A watchman was stationed on the city wall to warn of approaching danger. This particular watchman is instructed to observe and communicate reality, warning Judah not to rely on Babylon's apparent power.

What should the watchman be according to the end of verse 7? _____

The imagery of chariots, horsemen and riders reflects an approaching army. The watchman stands day and night. This emphasizes vigilance, perseverance and the tension between promise and fulfillment. This reinforces that God's word may take time, but it does not fail.

What does the watchman report? _____

All its false gods have shattered on the ground. The watchman proclaims the fulfilled prophecy against Babylon.

Babylon looked invincible in the ancient world. Judah would later be tempted to fear, rely on and imitate Babylon. But God is saying not to trust in what looks powerful if it stands against the Lord. He wanted His people to understand that anything they relied on apart from Him would not stand.

Faith is not only believing God can act, but trusting Him while we wait and see no visible change. Our role is not to manage outcomes, but to remain attentive, just like the watchman.

Verse 10

This verse is referring to the people of Judah who have been oppressed. Threshing is the process where you beat grain to separate wheat from chaff. The phrase in this verse describes a people who are crushed, afflicted and painfully processed. It conveys a picture that is real but purposeful rather than random cruelty.

The ESV translation says, *“O my threshed and winnowed one, what I have heard from the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you.”*

Winnowing removes what is worthless and preserves what is valuable. From a spiritual standpoint, this points to refinement, purification and the preservation of a remnant. God’s judgment is portrayed as discipline that clarifies, not destruction for its own sake.

We see that God distinguishes here between Babylon → who is judged and overthrown and God’s people → who are disciplined and refined.

Verses 11-12

Who is this prophecy against? _____

The Edomites were descendants of Esau who was Jacob’s brother (Genesis 36). Edom was located southwest of Judah in the mountains of Seir. Again, they are ethnically related to Israel, but were often hostile towards them. Edom was known for its pride, independence and wealth.

What question is asked of the watchman? _____

The night is a period of darkness and uncertainty. This repeated question expresses anxiousness on the part of the people. Here, night seems to be symbolizing judgment, danger and suffering. Edom seems to be sensing approaching judgment and is seeking clarity—how much longer will it last?

In verse 12 we get the phrase, “Morning comes. But also the night.” Morning suggests temporary relief or delay, but the danger is not yet over (night).

“If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again.” This statement seems to be showing the necessity of returning to God for guidance, rather than relying on human predictions.

It is seen as a subtle call to repentance. Inquiry without repentance will not change the outcome. God leaves the door open for Edom to change, but they have to respond rightly. We see from these two verses that judgment might be delayed, but it is not canceled. Curiosity about what is to happen in the future is not a substitute for repentance. Edom stands at a crossroads. The question is not “how long until the night ends”, but rather “will you turn while there is still time?”

God warns that relief may come briefly, but without repentance, the night will return.

Verses 13-17

Who is this prophecy about? _____

This was referring to the people who lived in the desert between Babylon and Judah. Specifically, the north Arabian desert region east and south of Judah. This area included semi-nomadic tribes rather than a single empire. It was a harsh desert environment with limited water sources. It was dependent on oases, trade caravans and raiding neighboring territories. They often interacted with Judah through commerce and conflict.

The Dedanites (vs.13) were descendants of Abraham through his wife and concubine Keturah (Genesis 25:3) and were well-known trading people in northwest Arabia and were associated with caravan commerce.

Camping in thickets suggests they are hiding rather than trading, as well as fear and instability. The trade routes are disrupted by war. Here we see that economic strength collapses under God’s judgment.

Tema (vs. 14) was an oasis settlement in northern Arabia. It was an important stop on caravan routes. This people group descended from Ishmael (Genesis 25:15). This verse shows human suffering and a call to compassion even in the midst of judgment.

Verse 15 shows that this isn’t some natural disaster, but a military defeat. Even though the Arabian tribes are skilled warriors, they cannot resist what’s coming.

Kedar (vs.16-17) was a prominent nomadic tribe in Arabia who were known for their tents, flocks and archery. They symbolized strength, independence and military skill – meaning a people difficult to defeat. They too were descendants of Ishmael (Genesis 25:13).

We get a specific time frame for the fall of Kedar. What is it? _____

The splendor of Kedar will come to an end. “Few” survive, meaning severe devastation, but not total annihilation.

How does the chapter end? _____

Even though there were three separate oracles in this chapter, we can look at it as one message with three scenes.

Babylon (vs.1-10): False security in power and pleasure

Edom/Dumah (vs.11-12): False security in timing (How much longer?)

Arabia/Kedar (vs.13-17): False security in distance and toughness.

For us, Isaiah 21 isn't about knowing what's going to happen to these three nations, but rather us recognizing ourselves in them. Each nation depicts a different way that humans try to feel safe, but we know that each way will fail. This chapter diagnosed misplaced hope. It reveals what cannot shelter us when the storm comes. This chapter is asking: *What are we building our hope on when the storm comes?*

Let's look again at the three things these nations rooted their hope in:

- Babylon — their hope was rooted in political power, military dominance and economic might.
 - The heart issue exposed is that they trusted in what looked strong and successful rather than the God who rules history.
- Edom/Duman — their hope was rooted in timing. They want to know how long the darkness would last and when relief will come.
 - The heart issue exposed is that they want clarity without repentance, relief without return. True hope requires returning, not merely inquiring.
- Arabia — their hope is rooted in self-preservation.
 - The heart issue exposed is when life shakes, they defaulted to self-rescue instead of humble dependence on God.

How this might look for us today:

- Hope rooted in power and control
 - Trusting governments, institutions, or leaders to deliver ultimate security or meaning
 - .Believing that the “right people in power” will finally fix what is broken in the human heart.
 - Measuring safety by influence, leverage, or control rather than faithfulness.
 - The modern mindset says, *“as long as we're strong enough, nothing can really touch us.”*
- Hope rooted in wealth and economic stability
 - Trusting savings, investments, insurance, or career success as emotional security.
 - Equating comfort with blessing and financial growth with God's favor.
 - Structuring life so that loss of income feels like loss of identity.
 - The modern mindset says, *“I'm okay because I'm financially covered.”*

- Hope rooted in timing:
 - “Once this season is over, things will be better” — without examining how God might be calling for change *now*.
 - Waiting for the “right season” to obey God, assuming God’s timing will automatically resolve problems.
 - Postponing hard decisions, conversations, or repentance because we’re “just waiting.”
 - Hoping crises, moral challenges, or spiritual darkness will end on their own.
 - The modern mindset says, “*I just need to survive until things get better.*”
- Hope rooted in inquiry without return:
 - Consuming spiritual content—books, podcasts, sermons—without acting on it.
 - Seeking knowledge or insight to feel secure, but resisting what God might be asking.
 - Treating curiosity or analysis as a substitute for humility and obedience.
 - The modern mindset says, “*I just need answers; I don’t need to change yet.*”
- Hope rooted in resourcefulness, preparation, skill and strength:
 - Trusting preparedness, planning, and competence to get through crises.
 - Believing that being capable, adaptable, or emotionally self-sufficient is enough.
 - Trusting expertise, experience, or toughness to endure hardship.
 - The modern mindset is “*I know how to handle this*” or “*I can endure this if I stay strong.*”

Another central theme in this chapter is watchfulness. Some things we learn:

- Watchfulness is a spiritual posture, not just physical observation.
- Watchfulness is dulled by false hope whereas reliance on God sharpens it.
- Watchfulness involves attentiveness to God, not just circumstances.

Three practical aspects of watchfulness are:

→ Prayer—is linked closely with watchfulness. It is an act of vigilance.

- ◆ Jesus ties watching to praying – “*Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation.*” (Matthew 26:41)
- ◆ Prayer slows us down enough to notice God’s movement.
- ◆ Prayer guards against panic and presumption.
- ◆ Prayer keeps hope alive during long waiting.
- ◆ Without prayer, watchfulness becomes anxiety.
- ◆ Pray the scriptures when you don’t know what to say- Psalm 130

→ Discernment—helps us discern truth from falsehood and protects us from deception that can undermine hope. It’s the ability to interpret the times in light of God’s truth.

- ◆ Discernment distinguishes God’s work vs. human work, opportunity vs. distraction, and warning vs. fear-mongering.

- ◆ Discernment allows us to wait wisely, not blindly.
- ◆ Discernment requires Scripture-shaped thinking.
- ◆ Discernment keeps us from reacting too quickly or too slowly.
- ◆ Discernment helps us ask: “*What is God calling for now?*” and “*Is this drawing me toward faithfulness or away from it?*”

→ Action—staying alert, focused and aligned with God’s will.

- ◆ Watchfulness always leads to action—not frantic activity, but faithful obedience.
- ◆ The watchful servant is working when the master returns (Luke 12:43) and the wise virgins prepare oil *before* the bridegroom arrives (Matt 25).
- ◆ Action expresses trust that God’s future shapes how we live now.
- ◆ Action means readiness to respond when God opens a door.
- ◆ Action means faithfulness in ordinary responsibilities.
- ◆ Action means doing the next right thing even when outcomes are unclear.
- ◆ Without action, watchfulness becomes passivity or spiritual procrastination.

Watchful living means praying before reacting, discerning before deciding, and acting faithfully without fear—because our hope is anchored in God, not outcomes.

When we look at watchfulness vs false hope:

***How does Babylon’s reliance on power, wealth and walls blind them to reality?**

“How does Edom’s waiting and questioning reflect a lack of spiritual alertness?”

***How does Arabia’s trust in flight, skill and self-reliance show a form of spiritual blindness?**

How does watchfulness prepare us to respond rightly to God rather than panic, passivity, or false hope?

How can we discern between simply *being busy or informed* and truly being watchful in our spiritual lives?

How does placing hope in God change the way we watch for challenges, opportunities, or warnings?