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Sermon Notes

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Babylon and Its Allies No Refuge for God's People

Isaiah 21:1-17

Where is the refuge from the coming storm?

- Wizard of Oz... they ran into the tornado shelter to survive the coming twister; FEMA's web site has plans for how you can build a safe room in your home to survive a tornado
- During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Americans built bomb shelters in their back yards; American public school children were trained how to fall under their desks and put their hands under their heads
- In 1978, huge blizzard, responsible for 54 deaths; one of them was a young boy who froze to death just feet from his parents front door; he was clearly trying to find shelter in order to survive... but his body wasn't found until the snow melted
- In the Bible Noah and his family built their own refuge from the coming storm... an ark
- Lot and his daughters ran to a cave after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

I. Trusting in Babylon: A Devastating Mistake

A. A Message of Warning... and Comfort... to God's People

Isaiah 21:10 O my people, crushed on the threshing floor, I tell you what I have heard from the LORD Almighty, from the God of Israel.

1. God's people are the point of history... from God's perspective
2. However, God's people are crushed by history... from a human perspective
3. so today: Christians are like dust on the scales among the "movers and shakers" of human history
4. but God has a message to His people, crushed by the wheels of the nations

- a. Israel was a little nation... weak, powerless, scarcely worth discussing
- b. Soon the northern kingdom, Israel, would be exiled by the Assyrian empire... 722 B.C.
- c. 136 years later, the southern kingdom would be exiled by the Babylonian empire... 586 B.C.
- d. God's people were going to be crushed by the overwhelming wheels of "progress"... the mighty Gentile armies rolling over them and crushing them
- e. But this crushing was no accident... it was God's purpose, to winnow out the wheat from the chaff among God's people
 - i) Threshing floors used to separate the edible wheat from the worthless chaff
 - ii) The threshing cart would be driven over the wheat and crush it
 - iii) The winnower would take the crushed stalks and throw them up into the air
 - iv) The lightweight chaff would be blown away, and the heavier wheat kernels would fall back down to the threshing floor
 - v) It is a metaphor for the judgment of sinners among God's people... separating out the elect from the non-elect, the true believers from the false, the wheat from the chaff
- f. Isaiah is giving God's people a message of encouragement and warning about their time under the domination of the Gentiles... under the boot of the Assyrians and the Babylonians
- g. Encouragement: God is sovereign over the nations, God's purposes for His people will prevail
- h. Warning: do not trust in any of these Gentile nations, nor fear them

B. Setting the Context: Assyria the Threat

- 1. Babylon seen to be a potential ally
 - a. Evil Assyria continues to flex its muscles in the region, to dominate the little nations
 - b. From the west, a rising power is seen... Babylon, the city on the Euphrates River... a conquered part of the Assyrian nation, but beginning to think about rebelling

- c. A young Chaldean prince named Merodach-Baladan, took control of Babylon from the Assyrian conquerors, and organized a rebellion against Sargon, king of Assyria... Elam and Media joined in this rebellion
 - d. Merodach-Baladan, King of Babylon, would reach out to Hezekiah, King of Judah, and urge him to join in an open rebellion against Assyria...
 - e. Story is told in Isaiah 39... after Hezekiah had been miraculously delivered from the Assyrian invasion, and had been miraculously healed from a fatal illness, messengers from Babylon came to visit him
 - f. Hezekiah received those messengers gladly and took them on a tour of his storehouses, showing them all his wealth and splendor, as well as all his weapons
 - g. It was pride that led him to do it... but also political expediency
 - h. He wanted to ally with Babylon and fight the Assyrians
2. Isaiah sees further and more clearly
- a. Yes, Babylon would conquer Assyria... but they wouldn't stop there... they would also take possession of the Promised Land under Nebuchadnezzar

Isaiah 39:5-7 Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: ⁶ The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. ⁷ And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

- b. But Isaiah saw beyond that... here in Isaiah 21, he saw ahead to the fall of Babylon itself... as we saw earlier in Isaiah 13... the Medes would rise up and would conquer their former allies, and their former conquerors... the Babylonians
3. Isaiah's mission: to persuade people to stop trusting in their own salvation and start trusting in God's salvation
4. Specifically: don't trust in the nations... don't fear the nations
- a. Don't be so afraid of Assyria that you lose your perspective
 - b. Don't allow that fear of Assyria drive you away from the Lord and into the arms of a foreign power
 - c. Don't trust in Egypt to help you... Isaiah 19-20, and Isaiah 30

d. Don't trust in Babylon to help you either... Isaiah 21

5. the true message: trust in the Lord, fear the Lord

a. the Lord is the one you should fear

Isaiah 8:13-14 The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, ¹⁴ and he will be a sanctuary

b. the Lord is the one you must trust

Isaiah 8:17 I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.

Isaiah 25:9 In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

c. The nations are as nothing in God's sight

Isaiah 40:15 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust

d. the nations are ALL under God's judgment

Isaiah 34:2 The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter.

e. so stop trusting in man!!!

Isaiah 2:22 Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?

C. Babylon the "Desert by the Sea"

Isaiah 21:1 An oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea

1. God's people tempted to trust in Babylon as an ally

2. But Isaiah uses a sarcastic play on words to show how empty Babylon is

a. Babylon was actually quite far from the sea, not on the seacoast at all

b. Why "The desert by the sea"? a picture of emptiness

i) A desert can't sustain life... Babylon is like a desert to God's people

ii) A sea can't sustain human life either...

c. Babylon has NOTHING TO OFFER US, nothing that can sustain our lives

3. A Whirlwind is coming

Isaiah 21:1 Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror.

a. Impending destruction of Babylon

b. Language here speaks of a windstorm coming from the southlands... like a desert wind, a sirocco

c. An INVADER is coming to destroy Babylon

D. The Way of the World: Babylon Betrayed by its Allies

Isaiah 21:2 A dire vision has been shown to me: The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot. Elam, attack! Media, lay siege! I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused.

1. Isaiah calls it a “dire vision”... the rise and fall of the world is repulsive to watch

2. the particularly cold way that the “spirit of Babylon” takes possession, and ruins relationships

a. when Assyria was the threat, Babylon, Elam, and Media were friends and allies

b. that was the very thing Hezekiah also wanted with Babylon... an alliance, a friendship, protection from the Assyrians

c. BUT once Assyria was vanquished by the Babylonian king Nabopolassar in 625 B.C., suddenly Babylon turned from ally to conquering tyrant

d. Babylon turned on Elam and Media and conquered them, and ruled them

e. So also it did to Judah, under Nebuchadnezzar

f. BUT in the third generation, the Medo-Persian alliance rose up against Babylon and conquered it in return

Isaiah 21:2 The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot. Elam, attack! Media, lay siege! I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused.

“What goes around, comes around”:

Habakkuk 2:16 Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed! The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory.

Mark 4:24 *"With the measure you use, it will be measured to you-- and even more.*

3. the groaning caused by Babylon will come to an end... and a new "boss" will arise

II. Isaiah's Amazing Reaction: Compassion

Isaiah 21:3-4 *At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see.
⁴ My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me.*

A. Isaiah Overwhelmed

1. rather stunning in that Isaiah knows Babylon will be Judah's conqueror
2. yet it is still made up of people, created in the image of God
 - a. perhaps he sees with clarity the fall of Babylon
 - b. he sees men, women, children slaughtered with a rage that reaches to heaven
 - c. sleeping infants, run through by blood-thirsty Medes, who show no pity whatsoever

Isaiah 13:18-19 *Their bows will strike down the young men; they will have no mercy on infants nor will they look with compassion on children. ¹⁹ Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah.*

3. Isaiah has a visceral reaction to the vision of Babylon's destruction
 - a. Body racked with pain
 - b. Pangs like those of a woman in labor

B. Compassion on the Lost

1. God's work of judgment is not His delight

Ezekiel 33:11 *Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'*

2. God yearns to be gracious, and mourns over the lost

Isaiah 30:18 *Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion.*

3. Jesus and Paul mourned over the lost
4. so does Isaiah here

III. Disaster Destroys the Party

Isaiah 21:5 They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!

A. Overwhelming Desire for Pleasure

1. Isaiah is astonished that the warriors of Babylon do not prepare for their coming destruction... instead, they throw a party
 - a. He speaks of the preparations made for a feast
 - i) They set the tables
 - ii) They spread the rugs
 - iii) They cook their food, they pour their drinks
 - iv) They lounge around, gorging themselves
 - b. This is the exact time they should have been manning the walls, defending them against the besieging forces of Media
 - c. Instead, they are so arrogant, sotted, unconcerned

Note: this is precisely what sin does to us... it sears our consciences so we cannot see the impending danger hanging over our heads

It's the way it was in the days of Noah before the flood... hearts saturated with evil, pursuing their worldly pleasures and their mockery of God right up to the end

It's the way it was in Sodom and Gomorrah... pursuing lust-filled pleasures the night before God rained down wrath on their heads

This is also how it will be at the end of the world:

Luke 17:26-30 "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ "It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. ²⁹ But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. ³⁰ "It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.

So Jesus commanded us to watch, to be alert

2. next chapter... Israel's defiant sin was to feast and celebrate when they should have been mourning over their sin

Isaiah 22:12-14 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth. ¹³ But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!" ¹⁴ The LORD Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," says the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

B. Belshazzar's Sinful Feast

1. the fall of Babylon we have covered twice before
2. the story is told in greatest detail in Daniel 5... the "writing on the wall"
3. Jeremiah tells us how

Jeremiah 51:37-39 Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives. ³⁸ Her people all roar like young lions, they growl like lion cubs. ³⁹ But while they are aroused, I will set out a feast for them and make them drunk, so that they shout with laughter-- then sleep forever and not awake," declares the LORD.

- a. Ancient historian Herodotus gives the account
- b. They diverted the Euphrates River, crawled under the walls and conquered the drunken city

Hereupon the Persians who had been left for the purpose at Babylon by the, river-side, entered the stream, which had now sunk so as to reach about midway up a man's thigh, and thus got into the town. Had the Babylonians been apprised of what Cyrus was about, or had they noticed their danger, they would never have allowed the Persians to enter the city, but would have destroyed them utterly; for they would have made fast all the street gates which gave access to the river, and mounting upon the walls along both sides of the stream, would so have caught the enemy, as it were, in a trap. But, as it was, the Persians came upon them by surprise and so took the city. ... the Babylonians were engaged in a festival, continued dancing and reveling until they learnt about the capture. Such, then, were the circumstances of the first taking of Babylon.

IV. Babylon Has Fallen... Don't Fall with Her!

Isaiah 21:6-9 This is what the Lord says to me: "Go, post a lookout and have him report what he sees. ⁷ When he sees chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert, fully alert." ⁸ And the lookout shouted, "Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post. ⁹ Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And

he gives back the answer: 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!'"

A. The Scene Shifts: Israel Receives News

1. in the first phase of this oracle, Isaiah sees in a vision the details of the falling city of Babylon
2. he cries out with agony over the fall
3. he even gives them military advice to prepare for battle
4. now the scene shifts to a watchman on the walls... a man waiting to receive news of great events
 - a. nowadays, we have Blackberry's with internet access
 - b. as soon as some great event happens anywhere in the world, you can receive it on your hand-held cell phone
 - c. back then, the reports came fastest by horse-drawn chariots, couriers who came with the news

B. The Watchman is Called on to Be Alert... Fully Alert

1. a watchman like this is desperately awaiting news of the great event
2. perhaps he knows that Babylon is being besieged by the Medes and Persians
3. suddenly he sees the chariots coming, driving frantically with riders to bring news to the people of God

C. Babylon Has Fallen... Has Fallen

1. there is a breathless, almost shocked feeling to the report
2. as if he can scarcely imagine this news... it can't be true!!
3. the fall of the gods of Babylon is of special interest
4. it was to these gods that Belshazzar drank his toast!! Now they lie crushed on the ground

Isaiah 21:9 All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!'"

D. Final Warning: Don't Share Babylon's Fate

1. Babylon's gods are on the ground

2. God's people have been crushed on the threshing floor for embracing the gods of other nations

Isaiah 21:10 O my people, crushed on the threshing floor, I tell you what I have heard from the LORD Almighty, from the God of Israel.

In other words... this oracle comes straight from Almighty God; trust in it, and you will be saved

3. the warning is clear: come out from Babylon and be separate, so you will not share her plagues

V. Edom and Arabia No Refuge Either

A. This Section Ends with Two More Brief Oracles

1. one against Edom... one against Arabia
2. two more Gentile nations whose power was attractive to Judah for military protection
3. these two Gentile nations were strong allies with Babylon... and they are doomed too

B. Edom: A Land Silenced by Judgment

Isaiah 21:11-12 An oracle concerning Dumah: Someone calls to me from Seir, "Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?" ¹² The watchman replies, "Morning is coming, but also the night. If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again."

1. the play on words, "Dumah" = silence, but similar to Edom
2. descendants of Ishmael and of Esau together inhabited this city
3. there is now a deathly silence, as of terror at impending doom
4. a voice calls out to the watchman on the walls, "How much longer till daylight?"
 - a. later on in history, watchmen frequently call out through the night... "Two o'clock and all is well" "Three o'clock and all is well..."
 - b. in this oracle, it's as though the terror and the tension is so great that the city cannot sleep
 - c. every minute crawls past like an hour; an hour seems like a lifetime
 - d. it is the longest night of their lives... for they fear that death will come soon

- e. they want to know when the terror and danger will pass
- f. the answer is a mystery: yes, morning is coming, but also the night... I cannot tell you how much longer the agony will last

C. Arabia: A Land Overrun by Refugees

Isaiah 21:13-17 An oracle concerning Arabia: You caravans of Dedanites, who camp in the thickets of Arabia, ¹⁴ bring water for the thirsty; you who live in Tema, bring food for the fugitives. ¹⁵ They flee from the sword, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow and from the heat of battle. ¹⁶ This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end. ¹⁷ The survivors of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few." The LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken.

1. now the Babylonians are fleeing from the Medes and Persians
2. they flee to the desert of Arabia, seeking some shelter there from their allies, the Arabians
3. the Dedanites are descendents of Keturah (Genesis 25:3), Abraham's concubine... they are Arabs living in the desert; Tema and Kedar are also names of tribes of Ishmaelites, also descendents of Abraham (Genesis 25:15)
4. their trade caravans have fled from the sword of the Persians and Medes now camp in the thickets of Arabia to escape destruction
5. Babylonian refugees fleeing from the Persians have come seeking their aid, but they have little to give
6. it is also a picture of terror, flight, destruction... there is no aid for Judah from them either, but judgment comes on all the nations of the earth
7. the final end of Arabia's glory is the same as that of all unbelievers on the earth

Isaiah 21:16-17 This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end. ¹⁷ The survivors of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few." The LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken.

8. bottom line: Almighty God decrees that the glory of all nations, all unbelieving peoples will come to an end... all human empires will fall back into the dust...
9. only the glory of the Lord will remain

Habakkuk 2:12-14 "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime! ¹³ Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people's

*labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?
¹⁴ For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as
 the waters cover the sea.*

VI. Application

How to Live in Babylon, and Not Fall with Her

A. See the Marks of Babylon Around You

Do we live in Babylon? Is the spirit of Babylon here in America? Is our nation characterized by idolatry, selfish ambition, lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, boastful pride of life? Are our leaders seeking to establish the Kingdom of Christ for His glory? Or are they building a human empire for their own glory?

If you know what to look for, you will realize there is no righteous nation on earth... that every nation is under the judgment of God... that all Christians, all over the world, live in Babylon

B. Fear the Lord Above All

C. Trust in the Lord Above All

***Galatians 1:3-5* Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.**

Christ is the only SAFE REFUGE from the true coming storm... Judgment Day

D. Understand Babylon's Final End

E. Seek the Prosperity of a City Doomed to Destruction

***Jeremiah 29:7* Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."**

Amazing!! This city was Babylon... the very place that Jeremiah would later say would be destroyed, never to be rebuilt

So also we live in a world heading toward judgment... yet we can work to make it a better place while we are passing through it; just as long as we understand this is not really our home

F. "Come out and be separate...": Live a Holy Life

***Isaiah 52:11* Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the LORD.**

Jeremiah 51:44-45 I will punish Bel in Babylon and make him spew out what he has swallowed. The nations will no longer stream to him. And the wall of Babylon will fall. ⁴⁵ "Come out of her, my people! Run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the LORD.

Revelation 18:1-4 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. ² With a mighty voice he shouted: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. ³ For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries." ⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven say: "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ... "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." ¹⁸ "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

G. Grieve For and Rescue the Perishing

1. Isaiah lamented the fall of Babylon... not because he embraced their idolatries, but because he cared about their people
2. I have already talked about how Jesus and Paul both lamented the fate of the lost
3. our calling is to preach the gospel to the perishing of Babylon... to urge them to be saved