

Judgment Upon the Phoenician City-State of Tyre

Isaiah 23

Isaiah 23 - *"The burden against Tyre. Wail, you ships of Tarshish! For it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no harbor; from the land of Cyprus it is revealed to them. ² Be still, you inhabitants of the coastland, you merchants of Sidon, whom those who cross the sea have filled. ³ And on great waters the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the River, is her revenue; and she is a marketplace for the nations.*

⁴ Be ashamed, O Sidon; for the sea has spoken, the strength of the sea, saying, "I do not labor, nor bring forth children; neither do I rear young men, nor bring up virgins. ⁵ When the report reaches Egypt, they also will be in agony at the report of Tyre.

⁶ Cross over to Tarshish; wail, you inhabitants of the coastland! ⁷ Is this your joyous city, whose antiquity is from ancient days, whose feet carried her far off to dwell?

⁸ Who has taken this counsel against Tyre, the crowning city, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are the honorable of the earth?

⁹ The Lord of hosts has purposed it, to bring to dishonor the pride of all glory, to bring into contempt all the honorable of the earth. ¹⁰ Overflow through your land like the River, O daughter of Tarshish; there is no more strength. ¹¹ He stretched out His hand over the sea. He shook the kingdoms; The Lord has given a commandment against Canaan to destroy its strongholds. ¹² And He said, "You will rejoice no more, O you oppressed virgin daughter of Sidon. Arise, cross over to Cyprus; there also you will have no rest."

¹³ Behold, the land of the Chaldeans, this people which was not; Assyria founded it for wild beasts of the desert. They set up its towers, they raised up its palaces, and brought it to ruin. ¹⁴ Wail, you ships of Tarshish! For your strength is laid waste.

¹⁵ Now it shall come to pass in that day that Tyre will be forgotten seventy years, according to the days of one king. At the end of seventy years it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the harlot: ¹⁶ "Take a harp, go about the city, you forgotten harlot. Make sweet melody, sing many songs, that you may be remembered."

¹⁷ And it shall be, at the end of seventy years, that the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire, and commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth. ¹⁸ Her gain and her pay will be set apart for the Lord; it will not be treasured nor laid up, for her gain will be for those who dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for fine clothing."

Background Notes

Isaiah 23 ends the subsection of the book of Isaiah in which God pronounced judgment on the nations surrounding Judah, through the prophet Isaiah. Beginning in chapter 13, judgment was prophesied against Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab,

Syria, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, and Arabia. In chapter 23, judgment was pronounced against the proud and wealthy city-state of Tyre, that was located on the Mediterranean coast in the ancient nation of Phoenicia.

History shows that all these prophecies of judgment on Tyre did indeed come true, as we'll see under our doctrinal points. Probably the hardest section to interpret is the mention of "seventy years" in verses 15-17. What and when were these "seventy years that were kept in one king's record"? There are several different interpretations in the various commentaries.

Ezekiel's prophecy against Tyre: *"Therefore thus says the Lord God: 'Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and will cause many nations to come up against you, as the sea causes its waves to come up. And they shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; I will also scrape her dust from her, and make her like the top of a rock' (Ezekiel 26:3-4).* A number of nations did come up against Tyre like waves of the sea. Between the waves there was always a measure of recovery, during which times Tyre was able to regain her status as a commercial power.

Which period of domination and recovery is in view in the "seventy years"? We can't say for sure. However, I favor the interpretation of the seventy years of the Babylonian domination, with some recovery and regaining of power when the Persians came to power. I'll explain why under our second doctrinal point.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord pronounced judgment against Tyre.

The city-state of Tyre was a very important Mediterranean seaport. It was located north of Israel, in what is Lebanon today. It was a very wealthy and commercially powerful Phoenician maritime city-state.

Verse 1 says that her downfall would cause the trading ships of Tarshish that were anchored at Cyprus to wail. Tarshish was probably on the southwest coast of Spain. In the ancient world, the ships of Tarshish were the largest and best commercial vessels sailing the Mediterranean Sea. The ships were "mourning" because Tyre, the commercial center of maritime trade, had fallen. It would be like the financial world wailing today if the Wall Street stock market were to fail and collapse.

Verses 2-7 predicted that with the fall of Tyre, the entire Mediterranean world would wail because of the loss of trade and revenue. Sidon, Tyre's sister, would be silent and ashamed. Egypt will be in anguish. Even the sea itself will mourn that she will no longer be "giving birth to children" - sailors and ships (v4). Ancient Tyre, whose origin was from antiquity (v7), was probably founded soon after the dispersion at the Tower of Babel – but Tyre will fall, to rise no more!

Verses 8-14 reveal the reason why Tyre, this great commercial powerhouse of the ancient maritime world, would be brought down. The Lord Himself planned Tyre's downfall (v8). Why would the Lord do that? The answer is simple: it was **Pride**. Verse 9: *"The Lord of hosts has purposed it, to bring to dishonor the pride of all glory; to bring into contempt all the honorable of the earth."*

The Lord hates the sin of pride, whether it's pride on a personal level or pride on the national level.

With the fall of Tyre, Tarshish would have no competition in her bid to take over as the leading Mediterranean trading center (v10). The whole proud Gentile Canaan region would experience the judgment that was to come upon Tyre (v11). Even those escaping to Cyprus will find no rest (v12).

To emphasize how great the downfall of Tyre would be, verse 13 says that God would use the Chaldeans - the Babylonians, of all people - as a major contributor to Tyre's demise.

It's interesting to realize that when Isaiah gave this prophecy, Assyria was the world power. At that time Babylon was totally dominated by Assyria. But within 100 years Assyria's power would decline, and Babylon would ascend as the great world empire. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians would be a major player in Tyre's downfall.

The Lord pronounced judgment against Tyre.

2. The Lord predicted blessing for Tyre.

Verses 17-18: *"And it shall be, at the end of seventy years, that the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire, and commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth. Her gain and her pay will be set apart for the Lord; it will not be treasured nor laid up, for her gain will be for those who dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for fine clothing."*

Verse 17 revealed that after "seventy years" Tyre would experience some measure of recovery - but Tyre would not become a godly nation - not by any stretch of the imagination! However, Tyre's ill-gotten gain would be set apart for the Lord and so that those who dwell before the Lord would have enough to eat, and for fine clothing (v18).

What was this prophecy all about? Has it been fulfilled yet? This is another of Isaiah's prophecies that had an historical fulfillment, and will have an eschatological fulfillment. The historical fulfillment came when the Jews (under Zerubbabel) returned from their 70-year captivity in Babylon and were rebuilding the Temple. Ezra 3:7 says: *"They also gave money to the masons and the carpenters and food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre to bring cedar logs from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the permission which they had from Cyrus king of Persia."*

So Tyre did experience a measure of recovery after her defeat by the Babylonians. At that time, her natural resources were used for the rebuilding of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. That is why I favor the “seventy years” in Isaiah 23 as being the seventy years under Babylonian oppression and captivity.

The eschatological fulfillment of this prophecy will come when the Lord returns and establishes His earthly kingdom, the millennial kingdom of Christ. Psalm 45:12, a Messianic psalm that looks on to the future, says: “*And the daughter of Tyre will come with a gift; the rich among the people will seek your favor.*”

So the historical fulfillment of Isaiah 23:18 is a type or picture that illustrates the blessed End-Time fulfillment when Tyre will be restored and will return to the Lord.

The Lord predicted future blessing for Tyre.

Practical Application

Give your former “ill-gotten gain” to the Lord!

First, let's be careful not take this practical application in the wrong way. I don't mean that Christians should be involved in jobs and activities in which we are receiving “ill-gotten gain”! No!

But what if you have just become a Christian, and you have some money or items that you acquired dishonestly during your unsaved days? What should you do? You're a Christian now, so you want to do what's right, but you're not sure what to do.

If you have stolen money or other items from your employer or another person in the past, you should make restitution as best you can. If you work for a dishonest or corrupt company, you should find another job and make amends in whatever way you can. And then - give the rest to the Lord!

But you may say, “Give it to the **Lord**? But I acquired that money dishonestly, and it was accumulated when I was an unbeliever!” Well, so what? As God used the wealth of pagan Tyre for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, so He can use the “wealth” that you accumulated dishonestly, before you became a believer, for the work of the Lord today.

Give your former “ill-gotten gains” to the Lord!