

God Foretells Destruction

Bible Background • Isaiah 47

Printed Text • Isaiah 47:10–15 | Devotional Reading • Psalm 13

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will UNDERSTAND why God would destroy Babylon; GRAPPLE with the destructiveness of delighting in power and pleasure; and REPENT from thoughts, actions, and feelings that separate us from God.

In Focus

Jeremy's life turned around when he earned a free ride scholarship to Yale. When he graduated, he went into investment banking. His salary was more than anything his family had imagined. He could afford the finer things in life, and he wasn't ashamed to flaunt it.

Time passed and Jeremy got married and had kids of his own. He rose up in the ranks at his company and even became vice president. Soon Jeremy abandoned going to church, claiming he was too busy and that the preacher only wanted money. He also rarely visited home and often talked down about the neighborhood where he came from.

One day his wife Judy said, "Your mom called earlier. Wanted to see if we could come over for dinner on Friday."

"We'll see her on the Fourth," Jeremy said. "Isn't that soon enough?" "Maybe she just wants to see her son," Judy said.

Jeremy doubted it. "Or maybe Aunt Pearl wants to ask me again if I'll cover her rent." "Times have been hard for people in your old neighborhood."

"They were hard for me too, but I got out of it. Why can't they? They're poor because they're just lazy and wouldn't take advantage of the opportunities they have like I did."

One day everything Jeremy trusted in came crashing down. His doctor told him he had a brain tumor. Now he wished he had a stronger relationship with God, and in the corner of his office, he knelt down to ask God to forgive him for his pride.

Has your pride ever separated you from God?

Keep In Mind

"Thus shall they be unto thee with whom thou hast laboured, even thy merchants, from thy youth: they shall wander every one to his quarter; none shall save thee." (Isaiah 47:15, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Perverted (Isaiah 47:10) shub (Heb.)—To turn back, apostatize

B. Prognosticators (v. 13) yada' (Heb.)— Those who show, teach, or make known their observations

Say It Correctly

Jotham. JAW-thum

Ahaz. AYE-hazz

Manasseh. Mah-NAH-suh

Antithesis. An-TIH-thus-siss

KJV

Isaiah 47:10 For thou hast trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me.

11 Therefore shall evil come upon thee; thou shalt not know from whence it riseth: and mischief shall fall upon thee; thou shalt not be able to put it off: and desolation shall come upon thee suddenly, which thou shalt not know.

12 Stand now with thine enchantments, and with the multitude of thy sorceries, wherein thou hast laboured from thy youth; if so be thou shalt be able to profit, if so be thou mayest prevail.

13 Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee.

14 Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame: there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it.

15 Thus shall they be unto thee with whom thou hast laboured, even thy merchants, from thy youth: they shall wander every one to his quarter; none shall save thee.

NLT

Isaiah 47:10 "You felt secure in your wickedness. 'No one sees me,' you said. But your 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' have led you astray, and you said, 'I am the only one, and there is no other.'

11 So disaster will overtake you, and you won't be able to charm it away. Calamity will fall upon you, and you won't be able to buy your way out. A catastrophe will strike you suddenly, one for which you are not prepared.

12 "Now use your magical charms! Use the spells you have worked at all these years! Maybe they will do you some good. Maybe they can make someone afraid of you.

13 All the advice you receive has made you tired. Where are all your astrologers, those stargazers who make predictions each month? Let them stand up and save you from what the future holds.

14 But they are like straw burning in a fire; they cannot save themselves from the flame. You will get no help from them at all; their hearth is no place to sit for warmth.

15 And all your friends, those with whom you've done business since childhood, will go their own ways, turning a deaf ear to your cries.

The People, Places, and Times

Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet during the eighth century. His prophetic ministry spanned the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Manasseh. Scholars have argued that Isaiah was more than likely connected to the king's court in some way based on his call narrative. Throughout his ministry, Isaiah's prophecies are directed at Judah and its idolatry and oppression. Isaiah's prophetic ministry can be summarized as judgment, renewal, and hope as he foretold Judah's Babylonian captivity as well as its return from exile and the coming of the Messiah. Tradition tells us Isaiah was eventually sawn in half during the reign of Manasseh.

Babylon. Babylon is an ancient city, and the name Babylon can be translated as “the gate of gods.” It is mentioned in the Bible, along with Egypt, as the antithesis to God’s people. When Israel sinned against God through idolatry and injustice, God allowed the Babylonians to punish Israel by sending Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Judah and send the Jews into exile. Babylon remained a superpower until the Medes and Persians conquered Babylonia in 539 BC.

Background

Isaiah prophesies the demise of Babylon (Isaiah 45). Isaiah announces the conquest of Babylon by King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire. This prophecy is linked to the salvation and restoration of Israel as they return from exile under Cyrus’ reign. Babylon is condemned for its idolatry (Isaiah 46). The idols of Babylon are deemed powerless. They are made from created things and cannot save their worshipers. The reign of Babylon is over, and its gods cannot protect its people.

God calls the Babylonian sorcerers and astrologers to account (Isaiah 47). Their knowledge is world renowned, but it is powerless against the sovereign judgment of the Lord. None of their astrological understanding or spells of witchcraft can prevent the disaster coming upon them. The once-proud city will be humbled through the divine arrangement of its conquest by a foreign power.

What is bad news for the Babylonians is good news for the Jews. Because of Babylon’s conquest, they will gain an ally in Cyrus who will give them freedom to return to their homeland and rebuild their capital Jerusalem as well as their Temple. God assures them no idol could have foretold these things and establishes His superiority over the gods and idols of other nations (Isaiah 48). He is God and He is in control of the destiny of not only Israel but all the nations of the globe.

At-A-Glance

1. The Pride of Babylon and Its Consequences (Isaiah 47:10–11)
 2. False Trust in Babylon’s Expertise (vv. 12–13)
 3. The Ultimate Demise of Babylon (vv. 14–15)

In Depth

1. The Pride of Babylon and Its Consequences (Isaiah 47:10–11)

God through Isaiah calls out Babylon’s prideful attitude. They have committed wickedness brazenly as if they were accountable to no one. The Babylonians were renowned for their knowledge, and this knowledge was the source of Babylon’s pride. Because of this, they put themselves in the place of God by saying, “I am, and none else beside me” (v. 10). These are proud, blasphemous words which display the inward attitude of the heart.

God would not allow Babylon to remain unpunished for this sin of pride. Calamity and disaster would come upon the city in the form of the Medo-Persian Empire and King Cyrus. None of Babylon’s sorcery and knowledge could conjure an escape from the Medes and Persians. Their kingdom would be taken over, and they could do nothing about it. As believers, we have no reason to despair when proud and wicked rulers or leaders are in power. Eventually, all of us will come before the judgment seat of God. There, none of our knowledge, wealth or social standing will be of any use—only whether we were righteous and humble before Him.

What is your response when you see wicked and proud people in power?

2. False Trust in Babylon's Expertise (vv. 12–13)

Isaiah mocks the knowledge and abilities of Babylon's sorcerers and astrologers. No matter what they did, they could not stop the judgment of God. Isaiah taunts them by pointing out that although they are experienced in enchantments and sorceries, they still will not withstand God's disaster. Astrology and sorcery were ways to control destiny. Babylon would soon face the truth that it was not in control of its destiny.

With all of their counselors, they weary themselves. They cannot figure a way out of their situation. Their astrologers try to predict an overturning of their fate, but it will not make a difference. Babylon's wisdom and knowledge will not be able to help it. Nothing they take pride in will pull them out of the ditch they dug for themselves through blasphemous pride and wickedness.

This same understanding of reality needs to be imprinted on our own hearts and minds. We are not in control, and any attempt to control our destiny is empty and vain. God is sovereign over our lives, and we need to look to Him for help. He controls our future and our destiny.

How do you respond to the fact that God controls your future and your destiny?

3. The Ultimate Demise of Babylon (vv. 14–15)

The astrologers and sorcerers of Babylon are compared to straw or stubble burning in the fire. They will not be able to save Babylon. Their fate was with the city and its empire. Looking to them for help would be fruitless. Sitting by their fire would bring no warmth. They can't save Babylon because they can't save themselves.

The nations who have dealt with Babylon since its origin will turn their backs on it. They will not help Babylon when calamity strikes. The pride of Babylon will be broken by the sovereign will of God. Babylon will have no way to escape it, no one to turn to, and no resources to meet this disaster.

Where do you turn when you are facing an impossible situation?

Search the Scriptures

1. What is Babylon's declaration of pride (Isaiah 49:10)?
2. What did Babylon rely on in times of disaster (vv. 12–13)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What are the modern equivalents in our country to Babylon's knowledge and witchcraft? What do we trust in as a nation?
2. Why do people turn to things like astrology and witchcraft?

Liberating Lesson

We may be tempted to despair as we see the world and its leaders walk in pride and wickedness. When it comes to our own nation, hyper-patriotism and blind allegiance has puffed up many with misplaced pride. They believe we as a nation are superior to others and continually progressing toward increasing splendor. Our Scriptures tell us God is in control of the nations. He lifts up some and casts down others. Loyalty to your country is a good thing but blind loyalty and pride absent of dependence on God is a path to ruin. We may despair at the

injustice we see in the world, but God will call the nations to account for their pride and wickedness. Oppressive regimes and unjust laws are a result of human pride. But human pride will always be brought low under the sovereignty of God.

Application for Activation

No nation is beyond the pride we read about in Isaiah’s description of Babylon. As individuals, we are equally in danger of exhibiting this kind of pride. In the coming week take some time to pray for our nation and its leaders. Also, make a plan to serve others. This is a surefire way to root out pride in your life.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Isaiah 47:10-15

In Isaiah 46, the prophet begins to focus on the nation of Babylon. First, he attacks the so-called gods of Babylon for being powerless and pathetic (see 46:1–7). Now, in Isaiah 47 he turns to pronounce judgment on Babylon itself. For centuries the Southern Kingdom of Judah had rebelled against God and been unfaithful to the covenant He had made with them. The time for their judgment had come, and God had chosen Babylon as His instrument of judgment against His own people. God now reminds Babylon that it was He who had “given” Judah into their hand (v. 6). Historically, this took place in 586 BC, when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and carried many of the people into exile. However, Babylon had overstepped their bounds and showed them no mercy (see v. 6). For this and other crimes, Babylon is now just as deserving of God’s judgment as Judah (see also Isaiah 13).

10 For thou hast trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me.

The Hebrew word for “wickedness” is ra’ah (ra-AH), the most common word used to refer to moral evil in the Old Testament. Babylon’s wickedness includes idol worship (46:1–2, 5–7), pride (vv. 5, 7–8), love of luxury and “pleasures” (v. 8), and sorcery and enchantment (v. 9). All of these sins may be in mind in verse 10, but perhaps sorcery above all since it was just mentioned and will be the main focus of the following verses. Babylon feels perfectly secure in their evil because they are the current

world superpower, and no one on earth can hold them accountable for their actions. They boast in their “wisdom” and “knowledge.” This is a worldly kind of wisdom, polluted by sin and based on the magical arts of false religion. This is quite different from true wisdom that comes from God alone (see Proverbs 1:7). In their pride and arrogance, they conclude, “I am, and none else [are] beside me,” an attitude also stated previously (v. 8). Babylon believes that they are supreme, independent, and cannot be defeated. They can do whatever they please.

But God has made this very same claim to be alone and unique in greatness and supremacy (see 45:18, 21; 46:9). Also, Babylon’s simple statement, “I am” echoes God’s words of self-identification (Exodus 3:14). In reality, though, Isaiah’s description of God’s incredible power (Isaiah 40) makes it quite clear that the arrogant claims of Babylon and all other earthly powers are simply laughable: all people are “as grasshoppers” (v. 22); the world’s rulers are as “nothing” (v. 23); God can merely “blow upon them, and they shall wither” (v. 24). When Babylon’s power confronts God’s, there is simply no contest.

We may often treat pride as one of the so-called “acceptable sins.” In other words, we acknowledge that pride is wrong, but don’t take it seriously when we see it in ourselves or in others. But the Bible teaches that God “resisteth the proud” (James 4:6). One of the sins the prophets most often emphasize that leads to God’s judgment on various nations is the sin of pride (e.g., Isaiah 10:5–19). Pride is also at the root of the first sin committed by Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). They were created to submit to God’s good rule, but instead they wanted to make their own rules and determine good and evil for themselves. When they sinned, then, they were arrogantly trying to elevate themselves to the place of God. Anyone, even those who are poor and of lower social status, can develop a prideful heart and must humble themselves before the Lord. However, as in Isaiah’s day, it is usually the most powerful and wealthy individuals and nations of the world who are most likely to echo the prideful words of Babylon: “I am, and none else [are] beside me.” Around the world, there remain many “Big Men” who engage in corruption, live as though they are above the law, and feel secure in their wickedness. But God will ensure that justice is done.

11 Therefore shall evil come upon thee; thou shalt not know from whence it riseth: and mischief shall fall upon thee; thou shalt not be able to put it off: and desolation shall come upon thee suddenly, which thou shalt not know.

Verse 11 shifts from the sins of Babylon to the judgments that God will bring against the nation as a result of their sin. This verse includes three statements, and all three make the same point: Judgment is coming, and they won’t be able to do anything about it.

Isaiah warns that “evil,” “mischief,” and “desolation” will come upon them. The first word is once again the Hebrew word ra’ah (ra-AH). Because Babylon had committed ra’ah against God (verse 10), they will now receive ra’ah from God. Here, though, the word is best translated as “disaster” or “trouble” in English since when ra’ah comes from God it indicates the judgment people deserve for sin rather than moral evil. These three terms are probably not three separate kinds of judgment, but three ways of describing the one general idea of God’s coming punishment.

When it comes, they won’t be able to charm it away or buy their way out. The first expression is from a rare verb shachar (sha-HAR), which occurs only here and in verse 15 in the entire Old Testament, and thus its meaning is somewhat uncertain. The KJV translates this “thou shalt not know from whence it riseth,” but most scholars today suggest that it means “you will not be able to cause it to disappear by magic.” This would mean their well-known attempts to use magic and sorcery to change the future are powerless against God’s judgment. It does not matter how much wealth Babylon possesses. It does not matter how powerful they are or that they have conquered much of the known

world. It doesn't matter how skilled they believe they are in controlling the spiritual world. None of it will do any good. God cannot be controlled or manipulated. This judgment is unavoidable.

While such words of judgment are meant to warn and terrorize the powerful wicked, these same words are meant to comfort and encourage those who suffer at the hands of oppressors. In recent centuries, those of African descent have been especially abused and oppressed by others who possess greater power and wealth. In many cases, justice seems unattainable. Yet the oppressed can be assured that God does not let the guilty go unpunished (Exodus 34:7). This justice may come in the present, as it did for Babylon when Medo-Persia conquered them. It may come in the more distant future. In many cases, wicked individuals live out their days on earth in comfort, but will receive justice when Jesus Christ returns one day. Ultimately, God will make sure that justice is done. It is in His character to raise up the weak and bring down the proud (1 Samuel 2:2–8).

Predictions of judgment in the prophets should also be a constant reminder of the need of all people for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Judgments like those that God brought against Babylon in history are a small taste and warning of the greater, eternal judgment that will fall upon all those who persist in prideful sin and refuse to repent and turn to Christ in faith. Yet for those who do humble themselves and cling to Christ alone for the forgiveness of sins, God's judgment upon sin has been absorbed by Jesus' taking their place at the Cross (see Romans 5:6–11).

12 Stand now with thine enchantments, and with the multitude of thy sorceries, wherein thou hast laboured from thy youth; if so be thou shalt be able to profit, if so be thou mayest prevail. 13 Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee.

Isaiah has already stated in verse 11 that this judgment cannot be avoided, especially not through their magical religious practices. But now, with a tone of sarcasm or mockery, he invites the Babylonians to give it their best try anyway! If ever there is a time to use their religious powers, this is it! The prophet, then, is addressing Babylon in the same way that Elijah addressed the prophets at Baal of Mount Carmel (see 1 Kings 18:27). He encourages them to put their faith to the test so that the worthlessness of false religion might be exposed.

The Babylonians were well-known in the ancient world for their rituals that were designed to influence the present and the future through magic (see Daniel 1–5). Some spells, for example, were meant to bring immediate health or prosperity, while others were designed to bind harmful spiritual powers and avoid future trouble. This is the false religion that emerges out of cultures that do not know or have rejected the true God. The terms "enchantments" and "sorceries" are the same Hebrew words used in v. 9, where these techniques were already said to be powerless to stop judgment. But since this is the normal strategy of the Babylonians to avoid trouble, they might as well try it: "maybe they will do you some good" (v. 12, NLT)!

Verse 13 refers specifically to the astrologers who attempted to understand the future by interpreting patterns in the sky. It was the ancient Babylonians who created what we now know as the horoscope. The term for "astrologers" is literally "those who divide the heavens," based on the rare verb *havar* (ha-VAR), which appears only here in the Old Testament. They too are useless, so Isaiah mocks them as well: Let them "save thee from these things that shall come upon thee"!

All of these practices are illegal under Israel's law and bring harsh penalties (Deuteronomy 18:9–14). Witchcraft was one of the practices of the evil queen Jezebel (2 Kings 9:22). Magical rituals involve evil powers, and they are attempts to control God and His world. Instead, Israel is called to submit to

God's good and wise control. Of course, Babylon did not follow the laws of Israel, but they are still accountable before the Lord for these worthless evils.

Isaiah and the other prophets consistently teach that there is only one way to avoid judgment, one response that God is looking for: repentance. This repentance means turning from their sins against God and others, and turning toward God in worship and toward others in love (cf. Isaiah 1:16–20). This is the same response demanded of those who would follow Christ today: turning from sin in repentance and toward Christ in faith. But in this case the prophet does not even call them to repentance, perhaps because he knows they will not listen, or perhaps because they are beyond the point of avoiding punishment. Instead, he encourages them to march further down the path to destruction.

Similar magical practices can be found in today's world. Some in modern Africa attempt to combine Christianity with magic, consulting the pastor on Sunday and the witch doctor or medicine man on Monday. These aspects of African traditional religions are attractive because they claim to give one control over the spirit world, which enables them to control their own present and future. Some aspects of the so-called "prosperity gospel," which originated in the United States and has been influential in Africa, are attractive for the same reasons. Many preachers are telling Christians to "sow seed" by giving money to the church with the guarantee that they will receive back 10 times the money they give. They are encouraged to purchase "anointed" oils, handkerchiefs, and water that will ward off evil and bring prosperity. Some sleep with a Bible under their pillow for spiritual protection. These are some examples of a Christianized form of magic or sorcery that has more in common with evil Babylonian magic than with the Christian faith. As in Babylon, these are attempts to control God and one's life. Instead, God's people should bring their concerns to the Lord in prayer and trust that He hears and responds as a loving Father in ways that are for our good.

14 Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame: there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it.

Here the prophet further emphasizes the uselessness of the astrologers and other so-called religious experts. Fire is a common image for destructive judgment, and in this case these men who supposedly possess great power are no better than "stubble," or straw, thrown into the fire. Clearly, God's power, represented by the flame, is far greater. They will be quickly consumed, and cannot even save themselves.

If this is true, how foolish to think that they can save anyone else? The second half of the verse warns that this is not a welcome fire; it is not a fire to keep one warm. This is purely destructive.

15 Thus shall they be unto thee with whom thou hast laboured, even thy merchants, from thy youth: they shall wander every one to his quarter; none shall save thee.

It is possible that the "merchants" are a new group introduced at the end of Isaiah's message to Babylon. But it is more likely that the astrologers and sorcerers are still the focus, but are referred to more figuratively as "business men." This is because the religious specialists were making a great deal of money from their fraudulent services to the people. But when God's judgment comes, they will be no help at all and will suddenly disappear. It will now be "every man for himself." The last statement in the chapter summarizes the main point of verses 10–15: judgment is coming, and "none shall save thee." Not their gods, not their wisdom, and not their religious experts.

The last word in the chapter in Hebrew is literally "savior," based on the Hebrew verb *yasha* (ya-SHAH). This verb is the basis for the Hebrew name Joshua, and for the Greek name Jesus (Matthew

1:21). Babylon had no savior from their physical judgment in this world, but today there is a Savior who rescues from the greater final judgment that is coming upon all people for their wickedness. Other gods cannot save us (Isaiah 46:7). We cannot save ourselves (vv. 11–14). Others cannot save us (v. 15). Only God Himself can rescue us, and He has done so by sending His Son to suffer God's judgment in our place out of love (see John 3:16). Indeed, there is no other Savior but Jesus (see Acts 4:12; Isaiah 46:4).

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Babylon's Days Are Numbered
(Jeremiah 29:8-14)

TUESDAY

Let Your Compassion Come Speedily
(Psalm 79)

WEDNESDAY

Persecution Foretold
(Mark 13:1-13)

THURSDAY

Keep Awake!
(Mark 13:28-37)

FRIDAY

Rise Up, O God!
(Psalm 74:10-23)

SATURDAY

The Humiliation of Babylon
(Isaiah 47:1-9)

SUNDAY

No Security in Wickedness
(Isaiah 47:10-15)