

## The Sovereign Lord Humbles a Great Empire Isaiah 46-47

### Introduction

There have been many great nations in the past, but they all have one thing in common. They have all collapsed to relative obscurity. What causes a people to become great and then to decline into this obscurity? One answer is that God is a benevolent God and so he blesses the nations. We also see in Scripture that God sovereignly raises up a nation to accomplish his will, and so they increase in their power and prosperity.

But this doesn't answer the question completely. Under God's sovereign rule we see another dynamic. It has to do with the beliefs and practices of a people/nation. As God sovereignly blesses or raises up a nation, we also see how God as the Creator and ruler of the world ultimately holds every nation or people responsible for their beliefs and practices. So generally speaking, when they honor him he blesses them and when they don't honor him he opposes them. And commonly we see this dynamic that as they choose to dishonor God they experience moral decline and with this comes a decline in power and cultural expression and every other area of life.

Under God's sovereign rule, as a people believe and think so it becomes. We cannot miss this: As we believe and think so we become. AW Tozer put it this way, "No people has ever risen above its religion... and no religion has been greater than its idea of God."

This is just what we see an example of in Isaiah 46 and 47. After God had raised Babylon to great power he then opposes it, and it went the way of all the other great empires becoming nothing like the gods it worshipped.

There is something else that we should understand as God brings Babylon into focus. From a biblical perspective Babylon represents all the world cultures outside of Christ. The Book of Revelation (18:2) refers to Babylon not as a literal city but as a sphere which is full of demons and from which the whole world has become drunk with its evil influence.

So while Babylon is an ancient city, even here in Isaiah, it is also a cipher for all the cultures and people who have turned from the living God to worship other gods. Babylon represents the world and every people group which has turned away from God.

What we find in these chapters is God's judgment upon Babylon or these idolatrous cultures. Chapter 46 addresses the gods of Babylon and how they compare to the true and living God of Israel. Chapter 47 is God's predicted destruction of Babylon.

Even though it is fairly lengthy I would like to read both chapters.

### 1. The Failure of False gods Compared to the Real Help of the True and Living God - Ch. 46

#### A. What are the gods of Babylon, really?

Chapter 46 explains the failure of idols of Babylon compared to the real help of the true and living God. The common belief of the day was that the prosperity of a nation was bound up with its gods, and so as Babylon had become a great regional it was presumed that their gods were the greatest and highest gods in the world.

But the God of Israel had another perspective. The Lord begins by saying that Bel and Nebo are bowed down. Bel was the king of the Babylonian gods and was considered the great determiner of all the

nations. Nebo was his eldest son so he ruled over the council of the gods. And every New Year the people of Babylon prepared a grand parade through the city and they strapped these gods to the backs of animals and carried them through the streets to be worshipped and given their due.

But the Lord points out the obvious. They have to be carried so how are they able to carry your burdens? You have to put them in place and they cannot move so how can they respond and save you? They burden the animals that carry them so how can they save you from your burden?

#### B. Who is the God of Israel?

The God of Israel is so much greater. He is not made by the hands of the people but rather he is his people's maker. He is not carried along but he has carried his people along ever since he conceived them. Even as Israel as a nation enters into its old age, almost a millennium, God continues to provide for them. He is the only one who has carried out all his purposes, who has declared the end from the beginning and has continually acted in history to raise up and bring down powers.

And so the Lord concludes in 47:6 that Babylon's gods had nothing to do with the power it was given because it was the Lord who had raised them up to judge his people.

#### C. What's the real problem?

But notice that the audience God addresses in chapter 46 is not Babylon, is it? No. God addresses his own people, Israel. Even after Isaiah called the people of God for 40-50 years to turn away from their idols, they were still blindly following the path of Babylon as they worshiped and served other gods. For those of you who have not been with us for this series in Isaiah, this has been a continual address.

But do we see the point of this relentless address? We tend to blame our problems on all kinds of things rather than on the real issue. We tend to say that if only I had more understanding parents or better behaved kids or a husband who knew how to love me or... then things would be different for me.

But what God wants us to understand is that my real problem is the idols of my heart.

Example: Age of Opportunity, Chapter 2 - Idol of Comfort

God wants us to see that we have all kinds of idols which lead to fear and anxiety and impatience and thoughtlessness and a sharp tongue and an imbalanced focus on my job and not my family, all of which have to do with what I treasure and trust.

These are two great questions to keep asking ourselves, especially when we are reacting to the events of our day. Am I treasuring something more than God right now? And am I trusting something rather than God right now?

Now it is true that we can become idol hunters in an unhealthy way where we see an idol around every corner and feel condemned in everything we do. Keeping the hope of the gospel and God's grace front and center is the only cure for this. But the other side of life's daily challenges has to do with what we are treasuring and trusting. And because of sin this issue never goes away. It is something that God is continually addressing in us.

Am I treasuring something more than God? And am I trusting something rather than God? In these two questions we prove in that moment what we truly believe about God. And as we treasure and trust God alone, what God wants his people to know in Isaiah 46 is that there is no God like him, who is able to help and who keeps... his... word. As we treasure and trust him he will become our glory. He will prove himself great.

Now after the Lord appeals to his people, he directly addresses Babylon in chapter 47. This chapter has a global appeal like chapter 45, and it's not only a prophetic vision of what was to happen to

a great ancient nation but what will happen to every nation who refuses to turn away from following false gods in order to follow the one true God. In chapter 47 we see the final humiliation of unbelief.

## **2. The Final Humiliation of Unbelief**

### **A. God's Two Declarations To the World**

#### **1) God holds the whole world accountable**

The first five verses speak of the humiliation that Babylon is to experience in the end and there are two declarations that God makes to the world. The first declaration is that he holds all the nations accountable.

In a world that thinks we will achieve peace through the annihilation or marginalization of all religions, there is a broad assumption that the world cannot be held accountable to God. Well, I want to say in all humility but also all seriousness, God does not see it this way. He cannot deny himself as the creator and ruler of this world, and he has given the world constant witness of himself so that no one will have an excuse. Therefore, the world and all its nations are held accountable to him. This is why he says, "I will take vengeance and I will spare no one."

I trust that this reality will continue to stir you and me to proclaim the one message every one of us needs to hear. Every one of us needs to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the most important message our world needs to hear and it is the only message that holds out hope to it.

#### **2) God will humble any people who worship another god**

Now in verses 7-15, the heart of this prophecy, there is second declaration that God makes to the world. And of course, it is a message that we, as God's people, need to take to heart as well.

His declaration is this: If you follow other gods you will face unavoidable destruction. God takes his own glory quite seriously.

Picture this: God is the one who brought everything into existence and he sustains all things every day, but the evil one is seeking to lead the world to believe the lie that God is not the creator and sustainer of all things. Is God not right in his jealousy for his glory?

It is God's supreme place as the creator and sustainer of the world to receive glory and for those people who refuse to give God the glory due his name, then they will ultimately be brought down in humility. This is the story of world history. God raises up nations to be great in order to accomplish his purposes, but because these nations refuse to honor God for who he is, he brings them down in humiliation.

### **B. The signs of unbelief**

Now as God makes these declarations to the world, he describes what actually causes a people or culture to collapse. We might call what God describes, the signs of unbelief, the signs of unbelief. When someone refuses to honor God as God they are simply walking in unbelief, yet for most people they never realize this for what it is. But in the eyes of God this unbelief is what causes their collapse, and according to verses 6-13 it is expressed most commonly in three ways: the way a people think (6-9), the values a people have (10-11), and the things a people trust (12-13). Say again.

#### **1) The way a people think**

First, unbelief is expressed in the way a people think. There are two totally different perspectives expressed in verses 6-7 on what caused Babylon to defeat Israel. It was actually God giving them power, but Babylon thought that it was their own power and that they were as invincible as God. In verse 8 God

quotes them as saying in their heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me." Does this sound familiar? This is clearly a reference to the repeated statement that the Lord had made about himself, but the people thought that they had the same self-determining power as God.

When a people begin to think this way, when pride controls their thinking, their judgment becomes distorted and it leads to all kinds of problems, such as the tendency to reach beyond ourselves. This can happen both as an individual as well as a nation. In business, it is called The Peter Principle where a person reaches beyond their gifts and abilities and ends up in a position that they are incapable of fulfilling. I will let you decide whether we are doing this as a nation.

What is important for us to see though is the destruction of pride. John Piper in his book "Battling Unbelief" says, "Deeper than all these forms of unbelief is the unbelief of pride, because self-determination and self-exaltation lie behind all these other sinful dispositions. Every turning from God-for anything-presumes a kind of autonomy or independence that is the essence of pride. Turning from God assumes that one knows better than God. Thus pride lies at the root of every turning from God. It is the root of every act of distrust toward God." p.40

Pride is what destroys a person and a people. It the greatest front to God, and this is why he will oppose. But the only real solution to our pride is to see God rightly. Again, John Piper says, "Humility can only survive in the presence of God. When God goes, humility goes. In fact, you might say that humility follows God like a shadow." p. 37

The only way for you and I to guard our heart against pride is to see God truly and to believe that his promises are far better than what the world and sin promise us.

## 2) The values a people have

Second, a people's unbelief is most commonly seen in the values they have. Verse 19 says, "You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, 'No one sees me'; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me.'"

This verse actually confirms what Piper just said. Pride is the root of all other sin. The pride of Babylon led them into wickedness.

And what is interesting is that Babylon's pride not only led to their wickedness but it led them to feel secure in their wickedness. In essence they were saying to themselves, "Our wickedness has some sweet dividends and there is no God who sees and is able to punish or restrain us."

Application-This is the real temptation of sin. It offers the great promise of satisfaction, and when we walk in unbelief toward God we actually believe sin's promises. We also think that sin is not that bad and we feel safe to go ahead and pursue it. Our unbelief leads us to think that the pleasures of pornography or an illicit relationship is greater than the joys of a clear conscience before God.

This is what led Adam and Eve to be tempted. They began to believe the lie of the evil one that God was withholding something good from them as he forbid them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Folks, God withholds nothing good from us, and it is only confidence in his true goodness that will lead us to believe that every promise of sin is empty. May God grow this conviction in our hearts so that we may see through the lies of sin and believe that sin will never prosper us.

Unbelief is most commonly expressed in the way people think and in the values people have, and finally in the things people trust.

## 3) The things people trust

Verse 13 says, “You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you.”

EJ Young says that “the counsels are probably all the plans and devices of Babylon for the management of her government and for self-defense.” I’m sure there were many discussions on how to keep the economy growing and the country secure, but it clearly went beyond this as they also sought the advice of astrologers who thought that the stars somehow could tell them what was going to happen on the earth.

We can pursue wisdom and knowledge in so many ways, and this certainly is not condemning good planning, but again, the real issue comes down to what we are trusting in.

Many times in Isaiah God has laid claim to this one reality. Only his word has been tested and proven trustworthy, therefore there is one ultimate place we can put our trust, and that is in God’s eternal Word. It is only there that we will know what is right and wrong, what is true and what is false. To trust in anything else will not stand.

These are the three common areas we express unbelief and they are also the four primary areas that cause the rise or decline of a nation. The way we think, the values we have, the things we trust.

## **Conclusion**

This really is a very humbling text from God’s Word. You see the total destruction of a nation. Because this is written to a nation or an empire, it is certainly appropriate for us to apply this to the nation in which we live.

1. Babylon shows us that God holds all nations to account
2. It shows us that every nation will rise or fall according to the way it honors the one true God.

Therefore we must work and pray hard that our nation does not become proud in thinking that it is great by its own power. We are blessed because of God’s sovereign grace and we will collapse like any other great nation if we do not honor God. Therefore, we must continue to work hard to cultivate faith in God and righteousness in our land. We do this in two distinct yet related ways. To cultivate faith the Church must faithfully proclaim the gospel to those who need a Savior. To cultivate righteousness we need to help our society pursue those things which honor God.

This chapter doesn’t only have national applications but it has personal applications. So the issue of dealing with the idols of our heart is vital. There is only one true God and he will not share his glory with any other gods. The way to honor him is to walk in humility and to keep killing pride in our hearts. The way to honor him is to treasure him more than we treasure anything else. And we honor him by our trust. You know, as God deals with idols again and again in these chapters, he certainly calls us to turn from them, but the underlying current in these chapters is his promise to be our help and to prove how great he is.

And so he calls us to two things: Treasure me more than anything else, and trust me alone. As we do these two things we will behold the greatness of our God.