

Text: Isaiah 18:1-7

Title: Watch out for the Lord of Hosts

Time: 4/19/2026 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Our church has prayed for the country of Sudan. Currently, Sudan ranks fourth on the ignominious World Watch list of 50 countries known for persecuting Christians. Their map colors the nation of Sudan in red, indicating a severe level of persecution for our brothers and sisters in Christ there. Civil war ravishes the country once again, and the Watchlist describes conditions for Christians under these circumstances:

“Many church buildings have been bombed, taken over and used as bases by militias and radical groups. Christians face intense discrimination everywhere – in courts, the workplace and schools.

“Converts from Islam live in constant fear and face intense threats, including social isolation, violence from militias and rejection from their families. Historical Christian communities suffer forced church closures, church-registration denials and even destruction of their buildings. Faith leaders and expatriates increasingly experience arbitrary arrest and detention due to the ongoing conflict.

“There were increased forced conversions to Islam and physical punishment for refusal to convert. The civil war has created a lawless vacuum where militias linked to both sides feel emboldened to persecute Christians without fear of repercussion. Attacks were common in rural areas but are now also taking place in urban areas with more established churches. Military leaders have increased the violence against Christians by painting believers as Western agents amid anti-Western rhetoric. Organised [sic] crime is increasing in lawless zones, where Christians are frequently targeted for extortion and

violence.” [<https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/sudan/>]

Isaiah 18 is the prophet’s message to this same area of the world. Our KJV calls the nation *Ethiopia*, meaning *land of burnt faces*. The ESV transliterates the name that the Hebrew Bible gives the nation of Isaiah’s day – *Cush*. We first read in our Bibles about Cush in Genesis 10:6. He was one of the sons of Ham, who was the son of Noah. It is his descendants whom Isaiah addresses here.

Throughout its history, the region has gone by other names as well, including *Ta-Seti*, meaning *land of the bow*. The Cushites were known as skillful archers. It has been called *Ta-Nehesi*, meaning *land of copper*, and *Nubia*, from an Egyptian word for *gold*, indicating the mineral wealth of the region.

The event that led to the current conditions in Sudan was the overthrow of a 30-year-old authoritarian regime in 2019. The coup was fostered by many months of popular protests, in which the protestors would often chant, “My grandfather is Tirhaka! My grandmother is Kandake!” Kandake refers to Candace, whose treasurer became a believer and was baptized by Philip in Acts 8 (v. 27). Tirhaka was the Cushite Egyptian Pharaoh who came to the aid of Isaiah’s contemporary, King Hezekiah, when Assyria had besieged Jerusalem (Isa. 37:9). Tirhaka’s father was Piankhi, who in 715 B.C. conquered Egypt to the north, beginning the 25th Dynasty of Pharaohs remembered in history as the “Black Pharaohs” of Egypt.

Isaiah’s message to Cush was preached during this time of the rising power of the Cushites in view of the contemporary threat of Assyria’s advance. All the current events of the day pointed to Cush’s need to watch out for Assyria, and the Cushite kings likely had sent delegations to Jerusalem in search of allies against this enemy. Isaiah agrees that Cush needs to watch out (“Woe”; “Ah” = “Watch out”; v. 1), but he

stipulates that it is not Assyria for whom Cush must watch. Rather, they must watch out for the Lord of Hosts (vv. 4, 7). Isaiah's message is "Watch out for the Lord of hosts," and he would tell us to do the same. Isaiah tells the ancient kingdom of Cush as well as us this morning how to watch out for the Lord of hosts, with three important emphases.

I. Watch out for the Lord of hosts by being still (vv. 1-4).

Application: Isaiah's Hebrew is advanced, and he often uses words we do not find elsewhere in our Old Testament. For that reason there are some differences between our KJV reading and the ESV reading of this chapter. In both translations, however, Isaiah's description of Cush paints a picture that is very busy going about its own national defense.

The *shadowing wings* in verse 1 (KJV; *whirring wings* ESV) describe the nation of Cush as though they were a busy swarm of flying insects. The word Isaiah uses here is translated *locusts* in Deut. 28:42. In our vernacular we speak of times when we are "busy as a bee." That is the idea conveyed by Isaiah's idiom in verse 1. He says that Cush was busy as a bee.

The business of this busyness is specified in verse 2. Cush, like today's Sudan, was a nation blessed with the upper portions of the Nile River. Utilizing their rivers, Cush had been busy sending messengers in boats made of bulrushes or papyrus throughout their nation to prepare against Assyria (v. 2a).

Verse 2b credits Cush with some distinctive features that had made them a great nation worth defending. *A nation scattered* (KJV) is literally *a nation stretched-out*. The ESV translators believe that the word refers to the height of the Cushites (*tall*) and that the next word (*peeled*, KJV; *smooth* ESV) to the smoothness of their skin, but I believe that the commentator Motyer is more correct to say that the words refer to a

kingdom that had been *long-standing* chronologically and peeled in the sense of *battle-trimmed* or *stripped down* for battle.

They were a *terrible* people (KJV) in the sense that they were feared (ESV), having just conquered Egypt to the north not long ago. They were a nation *meted out*, meaning that they were *expansive*, and *trodden down* is better translated *conquering* with the ESV. The last line of verse 2, referring to the rivers, probably describes the way those rivers quickened transportation from one end of Cush to the other, expediting their ability to communicate in less time as though the land contained shorter distances than it did. We might translate, *whose land the rivers have shrunk*.

The summary of verses 1 and 2 is that Cush is a powerful nation that is busily preparing for their national defense as they watch out for Assyria's eventual advance against them. But the prophet wants his own people and their Cushite visitors to become more concerned about a more important cause. In fact, this concern is bigger than merely the Cushites and Isaiah's fellow Israelis. His message concerns the entire world (v. 3). His message contains two commands – *see* and *hear*. Everyone in the world must see and hear what Isaiah warns about. Isaiah warns about the Lord of hosts (v. 4). The agricultural metaphors here say the Lord is often unnoticed but ever present.

In contrast to the busy preparations of Cush, Isaiah's God tells him that He is at rest, carefully considering in His dwelling place what He plans to do. In other words, it is not the advance of Assyria that is in control, nor the preparations of Cush. The One who is in control is the sovereign God of heaven, who is at rest carefully considering the situation on earth in His dwelling place. His dwelling place is heaven, and He rules over all. Isaiah's message in the face of all this earthly political tension is the message of Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the heathen. I will be exalted in the earth."

The next verse in the Psalm tells us that this same God who controls and considers nations is also in control and considerate toward our needs as individuals, when we encounter the circumstances of life that tempt us to respond like a swarm of worried buzzing insects. The Psalm promises, "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (v. 11).

Illustration: When I was in graduate school, the circumstance in my life that turned me into a worried buzzing insect was my school bill. To deal with that financial pressure, I worked three jobs while taking graduate courses. I worked security on the weekends until late Sunday evening, and then I was up for the pre-load Monday morning at UPS. From there I rushed to class, and then to my wood working job in the afternoons.

At one point I became so run down that I used a saw on my finger instead of the wood. Suddenly, I was incapacitated and unable to work. All my busyness went away, and I now had plenty of time to be still and know that the Lord is God. That chastening was a correction from the Lord that I must watch out for Him first, not my school bill. We must watch out for the sovereign Lord of hosts by being still.

II. Watch out for the Lord of hosts by being prepared (vv. 5-6).

Illustration: I am 62 years old, so I was happy to find a video that discussed the answers 80-year-olds gave, who were asked the question, "What would you tell your 60-year-old self?" 80-year-olds have a lot of good advice for their 60-year-old selves.

One of the top pieces of advice was to prepare for death. The video noted that when you are in your eighties, you often see your friends at a mutual friend's funeral. The point made by the video was that it is important for us 60-year-olds to have our will made out and all the logistical things cared for so that we are not a burden to our survivors when we die.

Application: Isaiah is not 80 years old as he preaches this message, but his advice to Cush, Assyria, Israel, and everyone else is that we need to prepare for our death. He tells Cush ahead of time, so that they can be prepared while watching out for a coming judgment of the Lord of hosts. We too must prepare.

The Lord of hosts gives life and takes it away: "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Isaiah's God sets that appointment for us. He is our judge.

Illustration: Years ago, after a friend of mine had retired from a distinguished military career, we had opportunity to have lunch together, and he shared with me the difficulty he felt over men he had commanded who had given their lives for their country. He was dealing with some survivor's guilt, especially as their commanding officer.

In the Lord's providence, my Bible reading that morning was in Daniel chapter 5, and I was able to share with my friend verse 23, where Daniel tells King Belshazzar, "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." Ultimately, it is the Lord who controls whether we live or die. Our breath is in His hands, not the hands of our commanding officer, our enemy, or our doctors.

Isaiah wants all the inhabitants of the world to focus on the one in whose hand is our breath. He wants every soldier in every battle to understand that everyone is going to die when He decides. We do not like to think about our death, but the good news is that the Lord did not ignore this need of ours.

The Lord of hosts became a man to die in our place that we might have eternal life through faith in Him. This is how we prepare for death and judgment to follow. Hebrews 2:9, "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man."

Jesus suffered death, the penalty for our sins, that we might live forever in Him. Have you trusted Him to save you from your sin and death?

III. Watch out for the Lord of hosts by being hopeful (v. 7).

Illustration: I was very blessed to witness the Easter sunrise service held in Arlington National Cemetery this month, hosted by our Armed Forces. The Army band played, and the Army chorus sang. The song selections included "Up from the Grave He Arose," "He Lives," "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," "Christ Alone," and Handel's Messiah's "Hallelujah Chorus." Readings were from Scripture passages like the Gospels and the great Pauline resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians 15. The message preached was "He is risen, as He said."

Application: I believe that service was the kind of gift from our nation to the Lord that Isaiah says Cush shall someday bring to "the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, the mount Zion" (v. 7). Zion is the believer's hope. In the middle of our National Cemetery, our nation for that brief hour looked ahead to a better future day in the hope of Christ's resurrection from the dead, which brings us to Zion. Zion is the future Jerusalem of Jesus's kingdom, which He will establish when He returns. In that day, every Sunday morning, in every place of worship worldwide, will be just like what happened in Arlington this past Easter. None will stay home. We shall watch for the Lord of hosts then with our hope secured.

Around the 9th century A.D., the region of Sudan converted to Islam, failing to follow Isaiah's direction to watch out for the Lord of hosts. Consequently, there is no peaceful stillness in view of God's sovereignty, no preparation for death and God's judgment, and no future hope awaiting God's kingdom in Sudan today, except among a few persecuted believers. I believe that verse 7 is specifically about the bright future of these persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ.

What shall become of our nation? In the end, our government of the people, by the people, and for the people will reflect what we the people believe. America will be what we have become. Whether I am an American who watches out for the Lord of hosts in hope will answer in part whether our nation is that kind of nation.

Conclusion: Are we watching out for the Lord of hosts this morning? In the face of all that troubles us, all of life's pressures that can turn us into a swarm of busy insects, will we be still and know that God is God, our refuge, and a very present help in trouble? In the face of our coming appointment with death and God's judgment to follow, are we prepared by faith in Jesus's death for our sins? In the face of all the change and decay we see around us, as we pass by our cemeteries and visit our hospitals, are we hopeful in anticipation of a great future in Jesus's Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts? Is Isaiah's message to his day, our message to our day? Are we telling others to watch out for the Lord of hosts?

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*