

Text: Isaiah 21:1-10

Title: "Babylon will fall, so be sure to stand clear"

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Introduction: In his book titled, *The Decisive Decade: American Grand Strategy for Triumph Over China*, former US National Security Advisor, Jonathan Ward, explains how China's Communist Party became our nation's premier adversary today:

"China's intellectual property theft, coercion of our businesses, subsidization of its own industries and companies, and in some cases, the destruction of entire American companies and decimation of American industries have taken a toll on us and our readiness for either competition or conflict. Through decades' worth of 'engagement' with China, America has transferred manufacturing and industrial capacity, technology, and capital to our primary adversary, a process that we may eventually regard as one of our greatest mistakes in history" (25).

The author of our passage, the prophet Isaiah, had seen his nation of Judah make a similar mistake of engagement with a powerful nation, whom they should have seen as their dangerous adversary rather than their friend. King Hezekiah had welcomed Merodach-Baladan of Babylon to Jerusalem for political engagement (2 Kings 20; Isaiah 39). Isaiah sternly opposed the king's politics with a warning about Judah's fall to Babylon, which came to pass about a hundred years after Isaiah spoke of it to Hezekiah.

Unlike the warning to us about China from men like Jonathan Ward, Isaiah's warning to Judah about Babylon came from the Lord (v. 10b). Isaiah's warning in this chapter is

the Word of God, profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. What Isaiah heard from the Lord, he reported to those who would listen. This morning, we must be those who listen.

Isaiah here performs the simple job of a faithful witness. The job is simple, but it is not easy. For Isaiah, these reports were burdens (v. 1; KJV), and their content was difficult to communicate (v. 2). In a world dominated by seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, we can expect that our calling to speak truth to those who will listen will feel like a heavy burden and a difficult responsibility.

There is another difference between warnings about China and the Bible's warnings about Babylon. The warnings in the Bible about Babylon are numerous and extend from the early pages of Genesis to the end of Revelation. These warnings are always about more than a time and place in which Israel faced a dangerous enemy.

In the Bible, a warning about Babylon is also a warning about a whole world in rebellion against God to the destruction of all who place their trust in the capabilities of this world. In Genesis, Babel's tower was to reach heaven to unite the world against God's mandate to fill the earth. In Revelation, Babylon is the one-world government built by the spirit of antichrist. Wherever we see Babylon in the Bible, we find a world that claims it is a better place without the God of the Bible. If your life is a world that has no need for the God of the Bible, then you are living in a Babylon.

Isaiah did not want Hezekiah to rely on Merodach-Baladan's Babylon, because it was unreliable. The Babylon of that day was destined to fall. For the same reason, the

Lord does not want you and I to rely on the world's approach to life apart from the true God, the Babylon of our day. It too is doomed to fall. I have titled the message, "Babylon will fall, so be sure to stand clear," and I would like us to see three simple ways that Isaiah stood clear of Babylon in his day, which are a good example for us today.

I. Stand clear of Babylon by rejecting its overtures (vv. 1-2).

Illustration: In this passage Isaiah warns about an enemy that his king, Hezekiah, had found to be a friend. Hezekiah had taken ill, but the Lord had healed him (2 Kings 20:1-11). Isaiah played a miraculous role in this healing. He had applied figs to Hezekiah's infected boil, and he had also provided a reassuring sign of a retreating shadow to confirm the Lord's promise of healing. Hezekiah experienced a great miracle from the Lord.

But Hezekiah seems more impressed by the gifts and letters from Merodach-Baladan of Babylon. We are not told what these letters said, but they were undoubtedly assurances of Babylon's best for the king and perhaps also requests for help against Assyria. Impressed with the gifts from Babylon, Hezekiah tried to make an impression of his own with his display of the treasures of Jerusalem.

In our passage, we may have a clue to some of the content of the Babylonian message on that day. The last part of verse 2 is a promise from Babylon of the help of Elam and Media, two allies, and a prediction that the trouble caused by Assyria would be made to cease by the proposed alliance. That proposal held out a false hope. It was a lie.

Application: Like Hezekiah, we who know the Lord have witnessed His mighty miracles of salvation and even His

healings in answer to our prayers. And yet, when the world comes offering an alliance with its deceitful materialism and false flatteries, we are tempted to take our eyes off the Lord and to become enamored with the things of this world. We become tempted to disobey the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Colossians: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Co. 3:1-2).

The representatives of Babylon presented themselves as good friends and a great solution to Hezekiah's problem, but Isaiah warns that they are more like blinding sandstorms from a land to be feared (v. 1). Isaiah says that treacherous people deal treacherously. Spoilers like to spoil others (v. 2). Like Jeremiah said, "Shall the leopard change its spots?" (13:23). We must stand clear of Babylon by rejecting its lies, while seeking the truth that comes from above.

The Apostle John put it this way: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust thereof, but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-17). Stand clear of Babylon by rejecting its overtures.

II. Stand clear of Babylon with concern for those who follow us (vv. 3-5).

Application: The upbeat overtures of Babylon made those who heard it feel like it was already time to celebrate victory over Assyria (v. 5). The cause of the wrong always obtains great momentum in this evil world. The cause of righteousness is always an effort to travel upstream.

And while all this celebration of the Babylonian alliance was going on, with its positive energy in the wrong direction, God's servant Isaiah became physically ill and spiritually distressed over what he knew was really happening. He knew that God's people were being lied to by Babylon, and their embrace of that lie saddened him to the point of fear for their well-being. In this distress of heart, he explained to Hezekiah that it was going to be Babylon, their new good friends, who would destroy them in the end.

You may remember that Hezekiah continued celebrating even after hearing that truth. (Isa. 39:8, "Then said Hezekiah to Isaiah, 'Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken.' He said moreover, 'For there shall be peace and truth in my days'"). His thought was a selfish one – "so long as there is peace in my day, I am going to be happy." He cared little for those who were to follow him, and that lack of care showed in the reign of his son Manasseh. Thanks to Hezekiah's actions, Israel would be destroyed, but Hezekiah was ok with that tragic outcome so long as everything was peace while he was still around.

Illustration: Our president has taken the opposite approach to Iran's nuclear weapons program. Whatever else you may criticize about his military action in Iran, you must admit that it is the opposite of Hezekiah's approach with Babylon. We need to pray for our leaders to have this wisdom.

When the goal is merely peace in our current situation, without regard for those who are coming after us, we are living like Hezekiah did when he was infected with the selfishness of Babylon. Unlike Hezekiah, Isaiah was concerned for the well-being of the Israel that would come after him. We need to stay clear of Babylon's selfishness by showing the same concern for those following us. Will our town have a good church then? Is that any concern of ours?

III. Stand clear of Babylon as a faithful watchman (vv. 6-10).

Illustration: On the Howie Carr radio program last Thursday, the host was explaining the view of our forefathers, like John Adams and John Jay, that our form of government will not work unless it is implemented by a religious and moral people. Citing the doctrine of original sin, Carr explained that our founders understood that we must not put our trust in the goodness of human nature. Because we are fallen, we must be restrained, and our governments must be restrained.

He quoted James Madison from *Federalist* Paper 51: "But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

Carr further emphasized John Jay's warning that we cannot be a moral people unless we are also a religious people. After his lecture, the host received a number of comments that he shared. One said, "I am not a religious person, but I am glad that our country still has religious people." It is one thing to quote the doctrines of the founding fathers, and quite another to start going to church Sunday after Sunday.

Application: Isaiah not only professed his concern for his nation's spiritual needs; he acted on his concern. God called him to stand as a watchman and to report the vision that he saw. Every watchman must live a life of integrity that backs his claims about truth. Isaiah lived such a religious life.

As the watchman of Israel, Isaiah sees war, and he sees that the war does not go well for Babylon and those allied with her. I agree with commentators who see here Assyria's defeat of Merodach-Baladan in 689 B.C..

Isaiah, the faithful watchman, tells his nation what he sees. He warns them to steer clear of a Babylon that is doomed to destruction. He understands that steering clear of Babylon makes life more difficult in the present – his audience is his own people, whom he recognizes are threshed or trodden-down as they have tried to follow the Lord. He says they are corn from his threshing floor (v. 10). It is his floor, because he had been threshed there too. Isaiah was one of the citizens of Judah, who had been under attack and the constant threat of the Assyrians. But in spite of the difficulty, Isaiah trusted the faithfulness of God's Word (v. 8).

In the Masoretic Text followed by the King James Version, a lion roars in verse 8. I believe this is the roar of the lion of 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." Isaiah had to be a faithful witness in the face of this lion's roar. How often have we feared the lion's roar remaining silent, when we should have spoken up courageously as God's watchman?

Conclusion: In the end, what Isaiah saw about the Babylon of Merodach-Baladan is the truth that we all must see about our world in rebellion against the Lord – "Babylon is fallen" (v. 9). Our world is a fallen world. To rely on the world and the things that are in the world is to climb aboard a cause that is fallen. It is like boarding a train that is about to fall off a bridge into a river. When Isaiah spoke of this fall, he saw what the Apostle John saw in Revelation 18:

“And after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory. And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, ‘Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies’” (vv. 1-3).

And then John heard one more voice, which tells us what we need to do about this coming fall of Babylon: “And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, ‘Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues’” (v. 4).

Babylon is falling, so steer clear of her by rejecting her lies, by showing concern for those who follow us, and by courageously accepting the responsibilities of a faithful watchman. Our day needs its Isaiah’s too.

“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