

Text: Isaiah 21:11-17

Title: "Life without God in the world"

Time: 7/26/2026 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Business schools use case studies to help educate their students. The idea is to take principles learned in a class on economics, statistics, human resources, management, or finance and apply them to real life decision making. The Harvard Business School is well known for its development of helpful case studies. The Harvard Baker Library website explains that "Today the vast majority of [Harvard Business School] classes are built on the case method."

You may remember that our study of the Pastoral Epistles utilized this teaching method. After each lesson we did, there was a paragraph titled, "Real Life?" That paragraph described a possible situation in Christian ministry, and then it asked us to apply truth to that situation, which we had learned from our chapter in the letters to Timothy or Titus. The strength of that teaching method is that it challenges us to apply truth to our lives for practical change. It encourages truthful theory to become faithful practice.

The paragraphs we have from Isaiah 21 are about Edom (vv. 11-12) and about various Arabs (vv. 13-17). Isaiah presents them to us as case studies of a spiritual condition that we have all experienced personally, especially those of us who are not Jewish. Paul describes this original common condition in Ephesians 2:11-12, "Wherefore remember that ye, being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world."

“Without God in the world” - this is the Bible’s description of a life we all once lived. Some here today may still be living this kind of life. At times when I ask someone to tell me how they came to know the Lord as their Savior, they will reply with something like, “I have always known the Lord. I have always been a very spiritual person.” That is an answer that does not understand the truth of Ephesians 2. Paul is clear — if we know the Lord as our Savior today, there was a time when we did not know Him, and a point in time when we first came to know Him. We are sinners saved by grace.

I was blessed this past week to meet someone for the first time who knows the Lord. His name is S., and it is his job to draw blood from patients at Catholic Medical Center, where we met. On his arm S. had a noticeable tattoo of Jesus on the cross, and when I asked him about it, he said that Jesus was his Savior. He explained that he had come to know Jesus as his Savior two years ago after suffering a motorcycle accident. Prior to that time, S. was without God in the world, as were you and I were prior to the day Jesus saved us. For me, that day was almost 50 years ago now. Praise the Lord.

Paul wrote the truth about what life is like for people who are without God in the world, and in our passage this morning Isaiah wrote a couple of case studies to illustrate what this life without God in the world is like. With the case study of an unnamed Edomite from Seir, the capital of Edom, we learn that life without God in the world is a life of hopelessness, just like Paul said (vv. 11-12). And with the case study of the Arabs, we learn that life without God in the world is a life of alienation, again just like Paul said (vv. 13-17). Those are our two points from the text this morning.

I. The Edomite’s hopelessness without God in the world (vv. 11-12).

Illustration: I read Numbers 22 in my Bible reading this past week, which is the account of the prophet Balaam on his way to help Balak of Moab curse Israel. The Lord told Balaam not to go, but he did anyway. Along the way, Balaam rides on a donkey that stops because an angel of the Lord keeps getting in the way. The donkey can see the angel, but Balaam cannot. Finally, the donkey refuses to go farther and lies down. Furious, Balaam beats the donkey repeatedly and demands that it get up and go on.

In verse 28 the Lord opens the mouth of the donkey, which then asks Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" Balaam argues with the donkey, evidently too angry to notice that this was a donkey talking to him. Then in verse 31, the Lord opens Balaam's eyes so he could see the angel the way the donkey could all along. Reading that made me realize that opening a man's eyes is just as great a miracle as opening a donkey's mouth.

Application: Biologically, donkeys are mute or silent, and the first thing we learn about the Edomite's life without God in the world is that it is plagued by a burdensome silence. Isaiah calls Edom a nickname in verse 11 – *Dumah*. He does so to make a point about Edom's life without God in the world.

Dumah means *silence*. It is used in some verses that disclose its gloom, like Psalm 94:17, "Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul had almost dwelt in *silence*." There this silence is the opposite of obtaining the Lord's help. It is also used in Psalm 115:17, "The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into *silence*." There this silence is experienced by those who are dead. Isaiah emphasizes first that life without God in the world, the life of the typical Edomite, is a life of helpless and deadly silence. The same must be said about the lives of most of our neighbors as well, the typical New

Bostonians, to whom we are called for gospel ministry.
Theirs is a life without God in a world of dreadful silence.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote about this silence in his *Tractatus* (1921). He suggested that in the material world we have facts, which are the conclusions of natural science. He proposed that these facts are the limit of language and logic. He concluded that outside of the material world of natural science, there is only silence, no language or ability to reason logically.

The Christian evangelist Francis Schaeffer wrote a book that utilized Wittgenstein's word *silence* in its title, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. He comments on Wittgenstein's philosophy this way: "Wittgenstein says that there is only silence in the area of the things man desperately needs most – values, ethics and meanings. Man knows it needs to be there, he argues, but he cannot even talk or think about it. . . . No matter how much we need them, there is only silence" (74).

Verse 11 teaches that the world without God is a world of this silence about the spiritual truths that man needs most, but Isaiah did not live in a silent world without God. The last two verses of our passage tell us how this silence of the material world is broken: "For thus hath the Lord said unto me" (v. 16a); "for the Lord God of Israel hath spoken it." The silence of the material world has been broken by God's word. He is there, and He has not been silent. Jesus said in John 10: "My sheep hear My voice."

Just like the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and the eyes of the prophet, He has opened a book of truth for you and for me so that we can know what we most need to know – what God says about what are we, what must we do, and why it matters. We are not without God and His word in this world, so we do have a reliable word to tell us the answers

we need most. God has spoken, so we can know moral good from evil, real meaning from false imaginations, and true beauty from corrupted ugliness. All we need to do is listen to what God has said.

Isaiah's case-study involves an Edomite calling out about how long the night shall be (v. 11). Living with no reliable truth about meaning, ethics, and beauty is living in the dark of night – a long night with no end in sight. The answer Isaiah has for the Edomite is the same answer he has for us today – “The morning comes just like the night has come.” Keep asking after the morning. It will return – there was no spiritual darkness before man's sin, only morning light. The morning light will come again, but we must ask for it.

Jesus put this truth this way: “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17). He promised in His Sermon on the Mount, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth and he that seeketh findeth; and to him the knocketh it shall be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8).

There is a promised hope that can dispel the hopelessness of life without God in the world in Isaiah's encouragement to ask and to keep on asking. That hope is the fact that God's Son came into this dark world of night as the incarnate Light of the World (John 1:4-5, “In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness overcame it not”). Jesus Christ is the light that ends the darkness. He is the dawn of morning that ends the night and brings everything back to the way the Creator intended. Jesus is the Word from God who breaks the silence about the saving truth that we need most.

The core of this truth is the gospel: we are sinners in need of a Savior from sin; God sent Jesus to take our sin on Himself at the cross and to die for our sin in our place; and this morning the Spirit stands ready to regenerate you with new life and forgiveness in Jesus's righteousness and resurrection if we repent of our unbelief and instead believe.

The prophet encourages us – ask, and the morning will come. The hopeless man without God in the world can find the hope he needs. God rewards those who seek Him.

II. The Arabs' alienation without God in the world (vv. 13-17).

Illustration: This paragraph is a case study about descendants of Ishmael. You may remember that Ishmael was the son of Abraham and Sarah's handmaid Hagar. Rather than waiting for Sarah's promised child, which required a supernatural miracle due to Sarah's age, Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands. Sarah offered Hagar to Abraham, who complied, and Ishmael was born through this sin.

Afterwards, Isaac was born, Sarah's son of promise, and Hagar and Ishmael are eventually expelled from Abraham's household. When Ishmael was born, God made this promise to Hagar about him: "And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" (Gen. 16:12). Alienation was Ishmael's destiny.

Application: So in the Scripture, the descendants of Ishmael are men and women who make their way with the strength of their own hand, what the Apostle Paul calls the works of the flesh. Making your way by the strength of your own hand is characteristic of the life of one without God in the world. And just like Ishmael was expelled from Abraham,

the life lived by the strength of your own hand is a life of alienation from our Creator, whose offspring we are.

In Galatians 4, Paul remembers the difference between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac, and he draws a parallel between Ishmael's mother Hagar and Mount Sinai, where God gave Israel the law (vv. 24-25). Ishmael's birth was accomplished by a human scheme, and trying to get to heaven through human ideas and efforts leaves us in bondage to our sin and alienated from God. It is like being stuck at Sinai, that mountain of God's thunder, where no one was allowed to come. To be without God in the world is to be alienated from God, just like lawbreakers at Mount Sinai were.

Isaiah's case study about the Arabs makes the same point. Uniquely, this burden of Isaiah is called a burden *upon* the Arabs (v. 13). That word *upon* is better translated *against* (NIV, HCSB). In summary, the scene that is described is what the Lord told Hagar hundreds of years prior: "Every man's hand is against" these Arabs. In Isaiah's day, it was the Assyrians that brought unrest to the Arabs. This past week, it has been missiles from Iran and their proxies.

Isaiah explains what alienation from God is like. There is the need to hide (v. 13), the need to flee (vv. 14-15), the loss of glory (v. 16), and a destroyed future (v. 17). Those who rely on their human efforts and ideas rather than on God's promise can expect the need to hide, to flee, the loss of their God-given glory, and to be destroyed in the future. Living without God in the world brings these effects of alienation.

The opposite, of course, is experienced by those who rely on God's promise of salvation in Christ (Eph. 2:13-22). We no longer hide, but we now experience proximity and peace with God (vv. 13-17). We no longer flee from danger, but now we go to the Lord in prayer for our protection and

victory (v. 18). We no longer lose glory, but now we obtain the citizenship of sainthood in the house of God (v. 19). We no longer look ahead to a future destruction, but now our foundation as God's temple supports us with a glorious future secured (vv. 20-22). Jesus is our cornerstone.

Conclusion: Every one of us was once without God in the world. The Edomite's hopelessness and the Arabs' alienation are experiences that we all once knew. It was the experience of each of the Ephesian believers to whom Paul wrote. But then came the day that Ephesians 2:4 came true for them:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ – by grace ye are saved." That happened to these Ephesians in the first century. It happened to my new acquaintance S. two years ago. It happened to me walking home from church at the age of 12. Has it happened to you? "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." This gift is for you.

"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