

Bible Study – God’s Sovereignty over the Nations

Isaiah 23



Introduction

Welcome to this Bible study! Isaiah 23 forms part of a series of oracles or prophecies in the book of Isaiah about nations in proximity to Israel. It ties in with a similar prophecy in Ezekiel 26. This study aims to develop a better understanding of God’s sovereign rule over nations as revealed in this particular chapter. We will therefore focus on the whole chapter of Isaiah 23.



Background to Isaiah 23

To better understand the context of this Chapter, it will be helpful to briefly review the historical timeline without going into too much detail.

Many nations attempted to conquer Tyre, including the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, and, much later, Muslims and Crusaders. And it was for good reason. Tyre was a prosperous city, earning its wealth through trade along ancient Mediterranean routes. We will learn more about that in our study.

While a precise year for the declaration of this prophecy is not clear, historical analysis places the prophecy within the context of the political turmoil caused by the expanding Assyrian Empire. It was likely given around the time of the Assyrian sieges and threats against Tyre, possibly during the reign of King Sargon II or Sennacherib, which would be closer to the end of the 8th century BC, 740–700 BC. Assyrian kings Shalmaneser V and Sargon II imposed blockades and gained control over mainland Tyre and its trade routes during this time period. This likely was the preposition to the fulfillment of the prophecy at a later stage.

Nebuchadnezzar

In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Tyre. After a 13-year siege, he broke down the walls and towers of mainland Tyre, fulfilling the first of Ezekiel’s prophecies. Nebuchadnezzar massacred all of Tyre’s inhabitants except for those who escaped to an island fortress half a mile out into the Mediterranean. In the years following Nebuchadnezzar’s defeat of Tyre, the city’s people moved the wealth of the former mainland Tyre to the island of Tyre by means of a large fleet. Protected by the sea, the new city thrived, and trade continued. The wealth

accumulated enabled the city authorities to build walls right up to the water's edge, making it basically impossible to attack the city on foot; the only option for enemy forces was to attack from ships or boats.

Alexander the Great

About 241 years after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the ancient city of Tyre, Alexander the Great began his campaign to conquer the known world, aiming to seize Persia to the east of the Mediterranean. Alexander the Great was named so for a good reason. He was a master strategist, fearless and successful in his conquests. But before reaching Persia, he headed south to conquer Tyre, fearing that while his troops were engaged in warfare in the East, the Phoenician navy might attempt to invade Greece. Alexander approached the island city of Tyre and demanded its surrender, but the city refused. After his initial attempt failed, he came up with a master plan. He used the rubble of the old town in Tyre left by Nebuchadnezzar to build a causeway out to the island.

To conquer the island fortress of Tyre, because he lacked a navy, he engineered an impressive feat of ancient warfare. They constructed a causeway from Tyre's mainland to the island using the millions of cubic feet of rubble left on the mainland, and according to historians, wood from the cedars of Libanon. As a result, Tyre was stripped down to bare rock, just as the prophets predicted.

History makes some interesting reading, explaining how he went about it. It is not the aim of our study to go into too much detail; it is nonetheless interesting reading. After just seven months, with the help of the Phoenicians, Alexander destroyed the island city using a fleet of many ships, and of course, by means of soldiers on foot using the causeway to get to a proximity of the walls and towers. Hearing of Tyre's fall, many cities opened their gates to Alexander in fear of being destroyed.

Both Isaiah and Ezekiel predicted that Tyre would never be rebuilt. This is significant because Tyre is strategically located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea and contains the Springs of Reselain, which pump ten million gallons of fresh water daily, enough to serve a modern city. Yet history shows that, after a series of invasions, Tyre finally and permanently fell in A.D. 1291 and has not been rebuilt to this day.

A little bit of geography.

In our study, it is essential to distinguish between the cities of Tyre and Sidon, the island of Tyre, the island of Cyprus, and Tarshish. Tyre and Sidon were neighboring Phoenician city-states on the coast of what is now Lebanon. Sidon still exists today as the city of Sidon, but little of the original Tyre remains. The island of Tyre is no longer an island because, after Alexander built the walkway for his troops, sand and sediment accumulated over the years, turning the area between the island and the mainland into a habitable landmass. The island of Cyprus remains known as Cyprus today. Tarshish was a distant trading region, likely in the western Mediterranean. Historians differ about its exact location, but most probably, Spain formed part of it.



Bible Study Format

The chapter, although a prophecy, focuses on the geographic locations of cities and regions and the trade relationships between them. Therefore, some historical background is needed. We have already included a bit of that and will add more as we move from verse to verse. In between, we have added questions that will prompt us to read between the lines, while others will help us personify the context in our modern-day context. As with our other Bible studies, there are no right or wrong answers. It is a journey of discovery. So, let's dig in.

Chapter 23 (NIV)

¹ A prophecy against Tyre: Wail, you ships of Tarshish! For Tyre is destroyed and left without house or harbor. From the land of Cyprus word has come to them.

- What does this verse reveal about the destruction of the **infrastructure** of the city?
- What does the verse reveal about the trade relationships between Tyre and Tarsish?
- Imagine being a resident of the city. What do you think the residents' response was upon hearing the news?

Cyprus was a significant trading port in the ancient world, connected to Tarsish's extensive maritime trade network. Word of the catastrophe would have spread quickly through the established trade routes that passed through Cyprus from mainland Phoenicia.

² Be silent, you people of the island and you merchants of Sidon, whom the seafarers have enriched.

- What does this verse reveal about the relationship between Cyprus and Sidon?
- What role did the seafaring trade play?

The residents of Sidon and Cyprus likely were more stunned and dismayed than silent due to the sudden and total destruction of Tyre, their main commercial hub. One can't imagine that it would not have been the talking point of the day!

³ On the great waters came the grain of the Shihor; the harvest of the Nile was the revenue of Tyre, and she became the marketplace of the nations.

- What does this verse reveal about trade relationships between Tyre and Egypt?

The grain imported from Shihor in Egypt became a significant source of income for Tyre, which acted as a central marketplace for the region. One can imagine how the grain was unloaded, most likely stored, sold in a marketplace, and distributed from there. It was a precious commodity at the center of the busy markets. Imagine having a shortage of flour during Biblical times!

⁴ Be ashamed, Sidon, and you fortress of the sea, for the sea has spoken: "I have neither been in labor nor given birth; I have neither reared sons nor brought up daughters."

- What is the prophet trying to say that the sea did not bear sons or produce daughters?

The verse is a good example of personification in scripture, where natural elements are given human qualities. Using creative imagination, hearing the sea speak must have been so convincing! It was an ominous announcement of a time of barrenness approaching Tyre. The era of freedom for sea merchants to roam the seas is coming to an end!

⁵ When word comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish at the report from Tyre.

- Why would Egypt react with anguish to Tyre's fall?
- What does this verse imply about the ripple effects of trade in the region?

Egypt's economy heavily relied on the Nile for agriculture. Wheat and barley were cultivated in the flood plains of the rivers in the delta, a highly fertile region with dark soils. For our study, the location of Shihor is not particularly important, but historians describe it as a region within the northeastern branches of the Nile delta. From a trade perspective, that location makes sense, as it is likely the shortest trade route between Egypt and Tyre.

⁶ Cross over to Tarshish; wail, you people of the island.

- What does this verse reveal about the scope of the upcoming disaster?

The region in question here is most likely the western Mediterranean, again emphasizing the strong regional trade relationships and the effect the looming disaster will have on the region.

⁷ Is this your city of revelry, the old, old city, whose feet have taken her to settle in far-off lands?

- What does this verse reveal about the history of Sidon?
- What allowed the city to settle in far-off lands?

⁸ Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth?

- What does this verse reveal about Tyre's status as a regional trading powerhouse?

The verse is shifting the focus from Tyre and its trading partners to the Almighty, far above the oceangoing vessels. As if to warn the audience, there's another side to this story. Lift your eyes from the horizon and look towards the sky!

⁹ The LORD Almighty planned it to bring down her pride in all her splendor and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.

- What motivation is given for the Lord Almighty's actions?
- What does this verse reveal about the character of God the Almighty?

There is no one else but God who can bring about these turn of events on this magnitude!

¹⁰ Till your land as they do along the Nile, Daughter Tarshish, for you no longer have a harbor.

- How does this verse depict a shift from maritime trade?
- Why is Tarsish referred to as "daughter"?

For Tarsish, there was not much on the table. Once their trading fleet is robbed of its purpose for existence, they will have to revert to agriculture, their trading partners in Egypt knew so well.

¹¹ The LORD has stretched out his hand over the sea and made its kingdoms tremble. He has given an order concerning Phoenicia that her fortresses be destroyed.

- What does this verse reveal about the relationship between the sea and those that roam over it?
- Why is the sea depicted as having kingdoms?

The verse draws our attention not to any city or region but to the vast expanse of the sea. It is so enabling that it allows kingdoms to flourish in its presence. These kingdoms had a port of call somewhere. Notably, Phoenecia, with its commercial centres of Cyprus, Sidon, and Tyre.

¹² He said, "No more of your reveling, Virgin Daughter Sidon, now crushed! "Up, cross over to Cyprus; even there you will find no rest."

- Why is there no rest even in exile for Sidon?
- What does this verse reveal about the inescapability of God's judgment?

There is no escape route. No place to find rest. Even for a daughter.

¹³ Look at the land of the Babylonians, this people that is now of no account! The Assyrians have made it a place for desert creatures; they raised up their siege towers, they stripped its fortresses bare and turned it into a ruin.

- How does the reference to Babylon's desolation function as a warning to Tyre?

For us to fully grasp the significance of this verse, we have to unravel a bit of History. The verse uses the example of Assyria's subjugation and destruction of

Babylonia as a historical parallel to warn of Tyre's looming fate. According to historians, this reference points to events during the Neo-Assyrian Empire's dominance over Babylonia in the 8th century BCE, with the most accurate depiction of complete ruin—turning the land into a desolate place for "desert creatures" through siege warfare and destruction—aligning with King Sennacherib's sack and flooding of Babylon in 689 BCE. This was before the time of this prophecy, so it must have been part of the oral history passed down from one generation to the next and, therefore, well known. History in this case served as ample warning.

¹⁴ Wail, you ships of Tarshish; your fortress is destroyed!

- This verse echoes the opening lament; what emotional response does it stir about the finality of loss without divine intervention?

The focus shifts back to Tarsish, almost like a pendulum bearing a weight of warnings swinging from one region to another.

¹⁵ At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life. But at the end of these seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute:

¹⁶ "Take up a harp, walk through the city, you forgotten prostitute; play the harp well, sing many a song, so that you will be remembered."

- What is understood as "at that time"?
- What are the practical implications for the residents of a city that has been forgotten for 70 years?
- What does this song reveal about Tyre's effort to regain attention after being obscure for so long?

Tyre's restoration after a period of ruin will be like a prostitute using her skills to be remembered and brought back to her trade. The image of a prostitute is used to symbolize Tyre's commercial activities, which are a source of wealth and power for the city. By playing the harp skillfully and singing many songs, Tyre will once again attract attention and trade with other kingdoms.

¹⁷ At the end of seventy years, the LORD will deal with Tyre. She will return to her lucrative prostitution and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.

- What is different this time in the Lord Almighty's dealings with Tyre compared to before times?
- What is the significance of comparing Tyre's trade to prostitution?

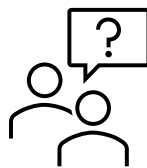
Prostitution is seen as attracting someone into an act that results in financial gain. There is a trade-off — a very lucrative one at times. And so it will be once again, as trading between nations resumes as before. But there will be a difference this time.

¹⁸ Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the LORD; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go before the LORD, for abundant food and fine clothes.

- What is different about the outcome this time?
- What will have to happen with a city and the authorities for her profits to be dedicated to the Lord?

Once again, to better understand this verse, we have to research Biblical history to determine its outcome. After Nebuchadnezzar's 13-year siege in the early 6th century BCE left the city subdued, a period of 70 years followed during which Tyre's dominance faded. After the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians in 539 BCE, Tyre experienced a commercial revival, as prophesied. Tyre regained its status as a significant trade center, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that the Lord would deal with Tyre, but this time in a different way.

During this time of renewed prosperity, Tyre actively participated in trade with the returning exiles of Judah. Historical accounts confirm that Phoenician cedar wood was used to help rebuild the Second Temple in Jerusalem, directly contributing to Tyre's profits toward God's purposes. Centuries later, in the early days of Christianity, the prophecy found a more profound, spiritual fulfillment. Jesus visited the region of Tyre and Sidon, and people from that area later sought him out. The book of Acts records that the apostle Paul found disciples in Tyre who welcomed him. The church historian Eusebius noted that by the 4th century CE, a strong Christian community was present in Tyre. He states that a significant portion of its wealth was consecrated to God and used to support the Christian ministry.



Questions for Reflection

1. What does this Chapter reveal about the **Character of God**? See how many character traits you can list.
2. What does this Chapter reveal about the **nature of man**? Once again, see how many you can list.
3. What does this chapter reveal about **yourself**?
4. What do you perceive God wants you to do **differently** from now on?

Insights and Afterthought

We discovered an extensive network of trade between cities with access to the Mediterranean Sea. It stretched all the way to the western Mediterranean, most likely including the eastern shores of Spain, and south towards the Nile delta in Egypt. One assumes many commodities were traded, like wood from the Cedars of Lebanon. On top of the commodity list was grain cultivated in the Nile Delta. It was a precious commodity with a sustainable supply-and-demand chain. It made residents and authorities along these trade routes prosper. But it also led to their downfall.

God is a just God watching over the daily actions of traders, city residents along trade routes, and the authorities governing these cities. As Tyre and Sidon grew in prominence, so did their pride and reputation. Although the chapter doesn't provide detailed insights, it's reasonable to speculate that unrighteous business deals, exploitation, and greed were widespread. Much of scripture reveals God's anger towards it.

The Lord Almighty brought about a realignment that shook up maritime trade at the time. He raised ungodly rulers, as he has done so many times throughout history, in the persons of Nebukadnezzar and later Alexander the Great, to achieve this purpose. The prophet Isaiah was God's mouthpiece, and through him, God made it clear to the residents of the cities of Sidon and Tyre that they would waste their time seeking refuge in Cyprus. The fall of Tyre heralded a time in history when Tyre was forgotten. Traders and residents of the region ceased to include Tyre's existence and activities in their daily squabbles.

As prophesied, there came a time when God dealt with Tyre again, but in a different way. Tyre will be revived, but in a way that likens it to a prostitute that will continue to fornicate with the nations of the earth. Imagine how that will go down in history books! Despite that, God allowed Tyre to become a servant to His Kingdom, and His Kingdom later expanded into that part of the world, becoming a place where Christian followers received support and earned a living.

Gos is indeed exalted above the nations, and in His sovereignty, made sure that His perfect plan for the nations unfolded at the time. It prompts us to rethink our relationship with Him, to revere Him for His wisdom in shaping history for His Kingdom's benefit and for ours, His servants. Let us therefore continue in our conquest of representing Him in wisdom and righteous living. Next time, when you get the smell of freshly baked bread, think about how that aroma drifted across the Mediterranean during a prosperous time many years ago, and how the scent evaporated into thin air when the pride and greed of man became the main ingredient of the recipe for their daily bread.

God is truly sovereign!

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