

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE BURDEN OF TYRE

WE NOW COME to the last of these special prophecies, or burdens, relating to nations and cities with whom Israel had to do. Three of these may be looked at as very definite types of this present evil world, to deliver us from which, Christ died.

Egypt speaks of the world as we first knew it in our natural state; a scene of darkness, bondage, and death. Its Pharaohs were recognized by the mass of the people not only as kings but as gods, and divine honors were paid to them. Thus they may well speak to us of Satan, the prince and god of this world.

From Egypt Israel was delivered by the blood of the passover lamb and the omnipotent power of God who led them triumphantly through the dried bed of the Red Sea where Pharaoh's hosts, who plunged in after them, were destroyed. On the farther shores of the Red Sea they sang praises to Him who had so wonderfully delivered them. We too, through grace, have known such deliverance and can say that henceforth just as Egypt was dead to Israel and Israel dead to it, so we have died to the world and the world to us by our identification with the crucified Saviour.

Babylon speaks rather of the religious world - a religion based not upon divine revelation but upon the vain imaginations of men, not subject to the will of God.

From this idolatrous city the worship of images was spread far and wide throughout the ancient world. It has its counterpart today in the sphere of worldly religion which has a form of godliness without the power. We see it in its completeness in the mystery of Babylon the Great in the book of Revelation; a vast religious-commercial system which will dominate the greater part of the world after the Church has been caught up to be with the Lord. But at last the rulers of earth's kingdoms themselves will tire of this incubus and will destroy it utterly.

Tyre speaks of the world as a great commercial system - where men through material pursuits seek to enrich themselves and their families, reveling in every kind of luxury and in forgetfulness of God. This is the pervading aspect of the world as we know it today, when nation after nation is reaching out for commercial gain and people are living on a luxurious scale such as has never been known in previous centuries.

But the day is soon coming when all these things upon which men have set their hearts shall be destroyed and the present world system pass away. We may see a prediction of this in the prophecy relating to the doom of Tyre.

“The burden of Tyre. Howl, ye ships of Tarshish; for it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no entering in: from the land of Chittim it is revealed to them. Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle; thou whom the merchants of Zidon, that pass over the sea, have replenished. And by great waters the seed of Sihor, the harvest of the river, is her revenue; and she is a mart of nations. Be thou ashamed, O Zidon: for the sea hath spoken, even the strength of the sea, saying, I travail not, nor bring forth children, neither do I nourish up young men, nor bring up virgins. As at the report concerning Egypt, so shall they be sorely pained at the report of Tyre” (verses 1-5).

The prophet foresaw the complete destruction of Tyre as a great metropolis whose ships reached every known port in the world of that day. Sidon was the mother city but it never attained to the greatness of its daughter, Tyre, settled by merchants who left Sidon to build a great city by the seaside, partly on the land and partly on a rocky island some distance from the shore, the two being connected by a stone causeway.

The history of Tyre reads like a thrilling romance and will repay anyone who takes the time to acquaint himself with it. The Sidonians were Phoenicians, an active, progressive race from which sprang some of the more progressive peoples of modern times. They are credited with having invented the alphabet at a time when other nations still used pictographs in order to express themselves in writing.

Our own alphabet in many respects is linked with these ancient Phoenician characters. It must have seemed incredible at the time of Isaiah's prophecy that Tyre should ever become little more than a memory, yet the predictions were fulfilled to the letter. The Tyre of today is but a squalid reminder of the great metropolis of olden days. The doom of the city would affect nations as near as Egypt and as far away as Tarshish because it was through the ships of Tyre that their merchandise was profitably disposed of.

“Pass ye over to Tarshish; howl, ye inhabitants of the isle. Is this your joyous city, whose antiquity is of ancient days? her own feet shall carry her afar off to sojourn. Who hath taken this counsel against Tyre, the crowning city, whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth? The Lord of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth” (verses 6-9).

Tarshish seems to be a somewhat general term, certainly including Spain, possibly also Great Britain. We are told that the Tyrian merchants brought from Tarshish tin, lead, and other metals (Ezekiel 27:12). These were found in the mines of Spain and Britain, the very word “*Brittania*,” the ancient name of that island kingdom, meaning “*the land of tin*.” On the other hand, in I Kings 10:22 we are told that Solomon's navy brought to Palestine from Tarshish, gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. The last came originally from India so that Tarshish would seem to refer not only to Western Europe but also to Eastern Asia.

Solomon's navy made the round trip once every three years. This would suggest a lengthy sea voyage through the Mediterranean, out past the Pillars of Hercules into the broad Atlantic, southward past the shores of Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, up through the Indian Ocean to Hindustan and back. It is noteworthy that these voyages were made in ships of Tyre, though belonging to King Solomon.

We can well understand how the great merchant princes of Tyre were looked upon as the honorable of the earth, even as today men give honor to those who amass vast fortunes through commercial enterprises. Unhappily, men who thus become wealthy, seldom give the glory to the God who gave them the ability to earn such vast sums. Tyre did not take God into account at all and so He would bring against it other great powers in order to **"stain the pride of all glory,"** for He has decreed that no flesh shall glory in His presence.

For us as Christians today it is the Cross of Christ that speaks of the shameful death of the One whom the great ones of earth rejected, but in whose death we may now see the end of all earthly glory. So with the Apostle Paul we may well exclaim, **"God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

"Pass through thy land as a river, O daughter of Tarshish; there is no more strength. He stretched out his hand over the sea, he shook the kingdoms: the Lord hath given a commandment against the merchant city, to destroy the strong holds thereof. And he said, Thou shalt no more rejoice, O thou oppressed virgin, daughter of Zidon: arise, pass over to Chittim; there also shalt thou have no rest" (verses 10-12).

The destruction of Tyre would involve to a very large extent the loss of prestige of many of the great merchant cities which had been founded by or were in close alliance with Tyre. Tartessus in Spain was a daughter of Tyre because founded by Phoenicians. The Same was true of Cartagena and also of Carthage in North Africa. Chittim, or Cyprus, owed its prosperity chiefly to the business done with Tyre. Hence, the howling of the merchants of all of these commercial centers when the great city to which they looked as the chief source of their prosperity fell beneath the judgment of God whom it had ignored.

"Behold the land of the Chaldeans; this people was not, till the Assyrian founded it for them that dwell in the wilderness: they set up the towers thereof, they raised up the palaces thereof; and he brought it to ruin. Howl, ye ships of Tarshish: for your strength is laid waste. And it shall come to pass in that day, that Tyre shall be forgotten seventy years, according to the days of one king: after the end of seventy years shall Tyre sing as an harlot. Take an harp, go about the city, thou harlot that hast been forgotten; make sweet melody, sing many songs, that thou mayest be remembered. And it shall come to pass after the end of seventy years, that the Lord will visit. Tyre, and she shall turn to her hire, and shall comm1t fornication with all the kingdoms of the world upon the face of the earth" (verses 13-17).

The immediate agency for the accomplishment of this prophecy of the destruction of Tyre was Nebuchadnezzar and his Chaldean armies.

Babylon, originally founded by Nimrod and known as Babel, had existed for many centuries, but it never became a great world power until it was enlarged and taken over by the Assyrians long before Nebuchadnezzar's day. Separated from Assyria, it eventually became the dominant power in the region west of the Euphrates.

Nebuchadnezzar besieged Tyre and partially destroyed it, carrying away many of its people into captivity. During that same seventy years in which Israel remained in captivity, the Phoenician city was in a state of degradation and collapse, but after the death of Nebuchadnezzar and, a few years later, the capture of Babylon by the Medes and Persians, Tyre was largely rebuilt, though it never again became the commercial city it had been. But it sought to establish intimate relations with various surrounding peoples in the effort to recoup its misfortunes.

During the Persian period of world ascendancy Tyre flourished to some extent, but was at last almost completely destroyed by the armies of Alexander the Great when he overcame the Persians and conquered most of Western Asia and Egypt. Tyre has never come into prominence since and yet there is a future of blessing predicted for it.

It is evident that the last verse of our chapter, like so many other prophetic scriptures, carries us beyond the present age to the establishment of the Messianic kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In that day a new city will be raised up on the ruins of Tyre and will be subject to Him whose right it is to reign, and will bring her glory and honor to His feet. This is predicted both here and in Psalm 45:12 where we see Israel, once more recognized as the wife of the Lord, and the daughter of Tyre among those who rejoice in her blessing and bring their gifts to the king.

“And her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord: It shall not be treasured nor laid up; for her merchandise shall be for them that dwell before the Lord, to eat sufficiently, and for durable clothing” (verse 18).

~ end of chapter 23 ~

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