

WINGS LIKE EAGLES: THE STRENGTH OF KNOWING GOD

Part 9: The Danger of Becoming Like Our Enemies (Isaiah 47-48)

Bryan Craddock – March 17, 2024

In *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien tells the story of a great ring of power taken from an evil being named Sauron. Everyone believes that this magic ring is the key to finally defeating Sauron, but whoever possesses it becomes obsessed with it. They grow paranoid, contentious, and power hungry just like their enemy. So, rather than using the ring's power, their only hope is to give it up and destroy it.

Magic rings are not real, of course, but there is a real danger that believers can become like those in the world who oppose us. We can obsess over them, becoming paranoid, contentious, and power hungry. We excuse it by claiming that such behavior is the key to our survival and victory. But we might not realize how much we have become like them. Our only hope is to stop grasping for power and to trust the Lord.

The Jewish people faced this same temptation during the ministry of the Prophet Isaiah. As we have seen, Isaiah 39 records his prophecy that the Babylonians would conquer Jerusalem and lead them into exile. So, beginning in chapter 40, he calls them to find strength in knowing the character, purposes, and plan of God. If they wait upon him, he says that they will renew their strength and mount up with wings like eagles (40:31).

But as Isaiah brings this encouraging section to a close in chapters 47 and 48, the Lord gives his people a four-step warning about the danger of becoming like Babylon. The first two steps in chapter 47 reveal reasons that Babylon itself will be conquered. Isaiah's original audience might have cheered when they heard it. Then chapter 48 promises the preservation of the Jewish people through the Babylonian conquest, but it does not present a flattering picture of them. It describes them in two more steps that mirror the description of Babylon in chapter 48.

Of course, the details in these chapters capture these two nations as they existed around 2,600 years ago. But the principles addressed still challenge us today. Those who are consumed with opposing the world will find themselves becoming like the world. So, we must keep our focus on the Lord and find our strength in him.

No Mercy

Skilled craftsmen seem to have the right tool for every situation. They know how to use them to accomplish their projects effectively and efficiently. But in the hands of amateurs, every tool might as well be a hammer. They rely on force rather than finesse, and they end up making a mess.

Isaiah first mentioned Babylon back in chapter 13. He referred to them in verse 5 of that chapter as not just a tool, but a weapon of God's indignation. In other words, God would sovereignly use them to punish the Jewish people for their disobedience. But human beings still make real choices, and God holds them responsible for their actions. The Babylonians would show no mercy to the Jewish people. They would abuse the authority that the Lord gave them, so in response he would withhold his mercy from them.

In Isaiah 47:1-4, the nation of Babylon is pictured first as a royal princess who will be humiliated. The Lord says,

Come down and sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, O daughter of the Chaldeans! For you shall no more be called tender and delicate. Take the millstones and grind flour, put off your veil, strip off your robe, uncover your legs, pass through the rivers. Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your disgrace shall be seen. I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one. Our Redeemer--the LORD of hosts is his name-- is the Holy One of Israel.

She would be brought down from her lofty throne to sit in the dust. Her tender, delicate hands would be forced to do laborious work. Her fancy veil and robe would be stripped away. Because of the Lord's vengeance, she would be disgraced as God redeems his people.

In verses 5-9, the portrayal of Babylon shifts from a young woman to a mighty queen ruling over several kingdoms. The Lord tells her,

Sit in silence, and go into darkness, O daughter of the Chaldeans; for you shall no more be called the mistress of kingdoms. I was angry with my people; I profaned my heritage; I gave them into your hand; you showed them no mercy; on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy. You said, "I shall be mistress forever," so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children": These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.

Since Babylon showed no mercy, her imperial children, so to speak, would all be taken away. She would no longer rule over any kingdoms. The Lord would strip it all away in a moment. That dramatic shift happened when the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC.

But we must bear in mind that Isaiah delivered this prophecy to the Jewish people around 100 years before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. So, what did it mean for them at that time? It must have been frightening to hear that their enemy would be merciless. But they are also assured that the Lord will hold Babylon accountable.

Perhaps the lesson is the same as that which Paul spells out in Romans 12:19-21 when he says,

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Those who have experienced the mercy of God should always show mercy even to those who show no mercy to us. Is that how you relate to the world? Are you willing to rely upon God to bring justice? Beware of becoming like the world in showing no mercy.

No Truth

Every person has a worldview by which we make sense of life. We begin to construct it from childhood, building it level by level as we accept new ideas as true. We find security in feeling that we understand how life works. But if we are misled along the way, our worldview might be as flimsy as a house of cards. Nothing could be more disorienting than to have it all fall apart.

According to Isaiah 47:10-15, that is exactly what will happen to the Babylonians. It will become clear that they had no truth in their worldview. In verses 10-11, the Lord says,

You felt secure in your wickedness; you said, "No one sees me"; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me." But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone; and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

Wisdom was highly valued in Babylon. From the story of Daniel, we know that as their empire expanded, the Babylonians chose the brightest and best young men from conquered nations to serve as the king's counselors or wise men. But from what the Lord says here in verse 10, it seems that the prevailing Babylonian worldview lacked any idea of ultimate accountability for moral choices. In that sense, it is no different from the modern secular worldview. If you will not answer to anyone for your choices, then live however you want. You are in charge.

But events in life have a way of reminding us that we are not in charge. In verse 11, the Lord reveals that the Babylonians will experience evil, a great disaster that will leave their nation in ruin. He is

probably referring to the attack of the Persian king, Cyrus. The Babylonians will seek help from magical charms and religious rituals of atonement, but none of their spiritual knowledge will work. It will be seen that they didn't really know anything.

So, in verses 12-13, the Lord mocks Babylon's spiritual experts. He says,

Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you may be able to succeed; perhaps you may inspire terror. You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you.

They believed that they could gain control through magic. They used astrology to try to predict the future. But no matter how much pseudo knowledge they acquired; they would still face destruction. In verses 14-15, the Lord says,

Behold, they are like stubble; the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before! Such to you are those with whom you have labored, who have done business with you from your youth; they wander about, each in his own direction; there is no one to save you.

This picture of fiery destruction in verse 14 may describe Persia's conquest of Babylon. But I cannot help but wonder if it looks ahead to God's final judgment. Every person will stand before him to be judged. In that moment, our false ideas will all collapse, and we will face the full truth of God. Jesus said that the punishment for sin will be eternal fire (Mt 5:22; 18:8; 25:41). The only hope of salvation is found in the atonement offered by Jesus Christ. As the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6), he is the only foundation for building a reliable worldview.

If you know him, you might be tempted to mock the world's misdirected attempts to discover the truth. But there is no room for such arrogance in a Christ-centered worldview. No one arrives at the truth by their own efforts or because of their nationality or family heritage. It only comes about through God's gracious intervention.

Paul emphasizes the privilege of knowing the truth in 2 Corinthians 4. He speaks of unbelievers in verse 4 and says,

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

But then in verse 6, he says,

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

If you know the truth of the gospel, give thanks, and pray for God to shine his truth in the hearts of others.

No Truthfulness

We have seen that Babylon would face God's judgment for showing no mercy and having no truth, but we turn now to chapter 48 which addresses Israel. It seems crazy to think that they could become like their enemy in any way. But we will see that chapter 48 mirrors chapter 47, and a mirror is a good way to think about this third step in God's warning. James 1:23 likens the truth of God's word to a mirror. It will not help you unless you act upon what it shows you about yourself.

So, in Isaiah 48:1-11, the Lord warns Israel about their lack of truthfulness, their hypocrisy. He begins in verses 1-2 by saying,

Hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and who came from the waters of Judah, who swear by the name of the LORD and confess the God of Israel, but not in truth or right. For they call themselves after the holy city, and stay themselves on the God of Israel; the LORD of hosts is his name.

This is a frightening thought! You can be in the right place, have the right heritage, be around the right people, and say all the right things without being truthful. Your confession is not genuine. Your life is unchanged. But why?

The Lord exposes their problem in verses 3-5. He says,

The former things I declared of old; they went out from my mouth, and I announced them; then suddenly I did them, and they came to pass. Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass, I declared them to you from of old, before they came to pass I announced them to you, lest you should say, 'My idol did them, my carved image and my metal image commanded them.'

Those who know the truth must allow it to shape their will. Rather than being obstinate, they must be submissive. They cannot allow themselves to be stiff necked or hardheaded. The Lord even says that he anticipated this tendency and gave the people of Israel prophecies in the past so that they would recognize the Lord's work rather than attributing it to idols.

In verses 6-8, the Lord speaks of prophecies of the future. He says,

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forth I announce to you new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, lest you should say, 'Behold, I knew them.' You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened. For I knew that you would surely deal treacherously, and that from before birth you were called a rebel.

That last sentence applies to all people, not just Israel. Our spiritual stubbornness traces back to the rebellious inclination that we are born with. As descendants of Adam and Eve, we are sinners by nature. We have treacherously deceitful hearts. So, even when we know the truth, our natural inclination is to find ways around obeying. Our behavior continues to fall short of God's righteous standard.

Why does God save such stubborn, hypocritical people? In verses 9-11, he says,

For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

The Lord saves people to display his glory. We never deserve it in any way. Even when he takes us through fiery trials, it is never enough to purify us completely. We still have so far to go. He alone deserves praise.

So, we must never think that we have arrived spiritually. We must remain humbly dependent upon God's saving grace. Truthfulness and honesty before the Lord will lead us to keep confessing our sins. First John 1:8-10 tells us,

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

By God's grace we can grow. The Holy Spirit helps us resist temptation and grow in godly character. But that growth requires us to be truthful about our struggles with sin. Keep clinging to the grace of God and trusting in the work of Christ!

No Peace

Back in Isaiah 40:11, the Lord comforted his people by saying that he would tend his flock like a shepherd. But sheep don't always follow their shepherd. They wander away and get themselves into trouble. Even when he is close by watching over them, something off in the distance might frighten them even though they are perfectly safe under his watchful protection.

The final step in the Lord's warning is that the people of Israel might act like those sheep. They might live with no peace fearing the merciless Babylonians. But the truth of the matter is that the Lord is always with them. So, in verses 12-13, he reminds them of his great power as he has done so many times since Isaiah 40. He says,

Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am he; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together.

The God who created the heavens and the earth has called Israel. In verses 14-15, he reassures them of his plan by saying,

Assemble, all of you, and listen! Who among them has declared these things? The LORD loves him; he shall perform his purpose on Babylon, and his arm shall be against the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken and called him; I have brought him, and he will prosper in his way.

These verses are difficult to understand. Who is in view here? Your first thought in verse 14 might be that the one declaring these things is Isaiah himself. But Isaiah does not fit the rest of the description. Rather than prospering, he was probably martyred by King Manasseh.

Most commentators argue that Cyrus, the king of Persia, is in view here since he is the one who will conquer Babylon and will prosper. But it seems like a stretch to say that the Lord loves Cyrus. The NIV tries to avoid this problem by using the word chosen instead of love. There are other places in Scripture where love has that connotation, but I don't see anything in the context that supports it here.

Verse 16 adds some important details to help us identify this person. It says,

Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there." And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.

The mention of the Spirit harkens back to Isaiah 42:1. There the Lord spoke of placing his Spirit upon his servant who will bring forth justice to the nations. When we considered that verse, I argued that it pointed forward to Jesus Christ. So, he is probably also the person in view here in Isaiah 48. As the Word of God, he revealed these prophecies to Isaiah. As the Son of God, he is the one that God the Father truly loves. As the coming Messiah, he guided Cyrus to rescue Israel. So, he is the one who brings hope that God's plan will ultimately be accomplished.

But Israel did not have to take such a difficult path. Their experience could have been entirely different. Verses 17-19 tell us,

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me."

The Lord made these promises to his people early on. The idea of having numerous offspring like grains of sand is first found in his covenant promise to Abraham recorded in Genesis 22:17. Leviticus 26:6 tells us that when God gave Israel the Law, he promised that they would experience peace if they observed his commandments. But that chapter also says that if they disobeyed, they would suffer under the Law's curses, including being conquered by other nations.

They risked being cut off and destroyed completely, but verses 20 and 21 give them assurance by saying,

Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!" They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and the water gushed out.

Just as the Lord saved them through the Exodus, he would also rescue them from Babylon. They could rejoice in his redemption. But their rescue from Babylon would not solve their heart problem. They were still rebellious sinners. Perhaps that is why the chapter ends in verse 22 by saying, "There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked.'"

To experience true peace, they would need to be rescued from their sin. The Lord addresses this problem in the next section of Isaiah that begins in chapter 49. He reveals more about all that his servant will accomplish. Isaiah 53:5-6 tells us,

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This great prophecy points forward to the death of Christ. When we believe in him, we are forgiven of our sins and declared righteous. Through him we have peace with God, and that relationship enables us to experience peace even in the trying circumstances of life in a fallen world. We can trust that our all-powerful God will give us the strength we need. We don't have to be controlled by fear like the rest of the world. We can find our rest in the God of peace.

Don't neglect the Lord's four-step warning in this passage. We may look out at the world and shake our heads when they show no mercy and live with no truth. But as those who have God's truth, we must ask ourselves whether we are truthful. Do we confess our sins and repent? Do we seek to submit to God's commands and grow? Finally, do we have peace with God? And if so, does that peace shape our response to trials?

If you have never done so, I encourage you to seek peace with God through faith in Christ. If you would like to learn more about why we need this reconciliation and how it is possible, I would encourage you to read Romans 5. Perhaps you are a believer, but you realize that you are becoming like the world. Would you renew your submission to God? Would you rest in his peace?

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13).

Reflect

What sorts of things make you feel angry or threatened by the world?

How should God’s character, purposes, and plan shape our response to those things?

What are some practical steps to help us rest in God’s peace? Consider Philippians 4.