

Isaiah Chapter 23

Verses 1-12: The burden of Tyre focuses the prophet's message on the major coastal city of the Phoenicians to the north. The Greeks called them "purple folk" because of their famous purple dye. They were the shipping merchants of the Near East. Zidon (Sidon), was another prominent Phoenician coastal city. Isaiah foresees the coming destruction of this great commercial empire.

Tarshish is the common designation for the westernmost part of the Mediterranean, as far as Spain. Chittim refers to western lands, especially the island of Cyprus. Thus, the prophet announces that trade with these distant places will cease because of Tyre's destruction. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel (chapters 27 and 28), predicted the fall of Tyre. Ezekiel prophesied that the entire city would be thrown into the sea.

Isaiah 23:1 "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."

Tyre, a Phoenician seaport on the Mediterranean Sea, was located about 35 miles north of Mt. Carmel and 28 miles west of Mt. Hermon. Tyre supplied lumber for King Solomon's temple (1 King 5:1, 7-12), and sailors for his navy (1 King 9:26-27).

"Ships of Tarshish": Tarshish was most likely in Spain, so "ships of Tarshish" were large trading vessels capable of making distant voyages on the open sea all the way to the port of Tyre. The Old Testament refers to them frequently.

"Laid waste": Tyre was under siege 5 times between this prophecy (and 332 B.C.). Only the last of these attacks (in 332 B.C., by Alexander the Great), completely leveled and subdued the city. Ezekiel prophesied this destruction (in Ezekiel 26:3 – 27:36).

"No house ... no entering in": Weary from their long, difficult journey, sailors would find no customary haven of rest upon arrival at their destination of Tyre.

"Cyprus": Upon reaching this island in the eastern Mediterranean, the seamen would learn of Tyre's overthrow.

We have mentioned before, that "burden" means prophecy.

Tyre had undoubtedly, been a city of much trade. Now that the destruction has come, we see the ships are not able to unload, or load here anymore. The commerce has stopped. It appears the destruction is so great, that there are no houses left.

Isaiah 23:2 "Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle; thou whom the merchants of Zidon, that pass over the sea, have replenished."

Sidon (Zidon), was the other important Phoenician seaport along with Tyre. Here it represented the rest of Phoenicia as reflecting the country's response to Tyre's overthrow.

It seems the needs of the lives of the people of the isle had been furnished by boat. Now that the boats have stopped running, it would be difficult to live.

Isaiah 23:3 "And by great waters the seed of Sihor, the harvest of the river, [is] her revenue; and she is a mart of nations."

Phoenicians carried much grain grown in Egypt aboard their ships. They also bought and sold much of the commodity.

"The seed of Sihor", probably means crops which were popular at that time that were grown in the farmland by the Nile River. When the Nile was full of water, the fields produced great crops. These full crops were sometimes sold to the other surrounding countries to feed them.

"Mart" means profit, trade, or merchandise. This is just speaking of her as a nation of merchants.

Isaiah 23:4 "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."

"I travail not, nor bring forth children": Isaiah spoke of barrenness, labor and childbirth frequently. Here the figure described Tyre, "the strength of the sea," bemoaning her desolate condition.

Zidon was an ancient city located on the Mediterranean. It was located about 25 miles from Tyre. Tyre is so without children that it is as if they had never had children. It must have been a bloody battle at Tyre, to destroy the children.

Isaiah 23:5 "As at the report concerning Egypt, [so] shall they be sorely pained at the report of Tyre."

Even though Egypt was not a country with charitable ways, it would be grieved to hear that Tyre had fallen to the enemy. Its main concern would be that the same enemy would come against Egypt.

Verses 6-7, Tarshish ... inhabitants of the isle": Tyre's refugees had traveled throughout the Mediterranean world (see verse 1). They too lamented the city's fall.

Isaiah 23:6 "Pass ye over to Tarshish; howl, ye inhabitants of the isle."

Sennacherib, king of Assyria, was a man of war. This is just saying, they should flee from him and go to Tarshish. The word "Tarshish" means smelting plant, or refinery. Howl is a cry of anguish. If they went to Tarshish, they could possibly find work there.

Isaiah 23:7 "[Is] this your joyous [city], whose antiquity [is] of ancient days? her own feet shall carry her afar off to sojourn."

Tyre was a very old city, dating from about two millennia before Christ. Tyre had been a beautiful city of great wealth. Now, it is in rubble. Isaiah is saying, could these ruins be that beautiful city?

Tyre had been a city from ancient times, and now it is gone. There is nothing left, so their people will have to go elsewhere to live, until it can be rebuilt.

Isaiah 23:8 "Who hath taken this counsel against Tyre, the crowning [city], whose merchants [are] princes, whose traffickers [are] the honorable of the earth?"

Tyre had very high international prestige.

It is amazing that this city would be thought of as vulnerable to war. It had been a city of people who worked and were honorable people. This city was the home of honest merchant seamen. They were not low-class people out to cheat someone, they were thought of as princes.

Isaiah 23:9 "The LORD of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, [and] to bring into contempt all the honorable of the earth."

“Pride of all glory”: This furnished the reason the Lord of Hosts brought the overthrow of Tyre, their arrogance stemming from the city’s prestige. They were foolish to rely on human glory.

Even though they were honorable men, they were filled up with pride. Their pride was offensive to God, because they did not give God any of the credit for their successes. They were puffed up with self pride.

God allows this to happen to them to cause them to realize where their strength comes from. This example stands out, not just for them, but for all who hear of it. Pride goeth before a fall.

Isaiah 23:10 "Pass through thy land as a river, O daughter of Tarshish: [there is] no more strength."

The prophecy invited the colonies of Tyre to exercise their freedom in taking advantage of the city’s fall.

Stop looking to Tyre, because Tyre is no more. This is saying flow over the land as a river out of its banks does.

Isaiah 23:11 "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."

The Lord had caused the downfall of the territory of Canaan, which included Tyre and Sidon.

Sennacherib might have sent the troops, but this is the hand of the LORD. The sea, in this instance, is speaking of the masses of people. The LORD spoke destruction on Tyre. Every city in the area looked on at the destruction, and learned it could have been them.

Isaiah 23:12 "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."

A city once noted for its freshness and revelry (verse 7), will become like a used up old woman, piecing together what is left. God used the Assyrians to crush her (contrast the virgin daughter of Zion in 37:22).

This is a warning, that even Zidon will be attacked and overcome. Chittim is Cyprus. They are to flee to Cyprus before any of the trouble starts.

Verses 13-18: The Chaldeans refers to the founders of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, including Nebuchadnezzar who besieged and destroyed Tyre. The Assyrian people thought of themselves as being an older people than the Chaldeans, but the Assyrians were conquered by them (in 612 B.C.).

The prophet predicts that Tyre will be laid waste, yet will survive, being forced to sing as a harlot, meaning she would no longer enjoy her independence but would have to pander to the desires of her conquerors.

Isaiah 23:13 "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."

The example of the Chaldeans, another name for the Babylonians, reminded Tyre of their hopelessness against Assyria. Assyria ravaged Babylon (in 689 B.C.).

Behold, just means, take a look at. Chaldea was originally a small territory in southern Babylonia. Chaldeans are natives of Chaldea. They were natives of the area of Mount Ararat. This area had been under siege as well, and destroyed.

The Assyrians had destroyed it. They did not kill all of the people, just destroyed their property.

Isaiah 23:14 "Howl, ye ships of Tarshish: for your strength is laid waste."

Isaiah is saying, they will cry out with mourning for the destruction that has come. This is speaking of those who traded with Tarshish by ship. They will not be able to trade anymore.

Verses 15-16: "Sing as a harlot ... forgotten ... remembered": Harlots sang to draw attention to themselves, attention not so hard to obtain in ancient days. Like those harlots, the people of Tyre were invited to sing songs drawing attention to their earlier prosperity.

Isaiah 23:15 "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 a harlot."

The devastation of Tyre was not permanent. A little village remains on the site of the ancient city to the present day. The time frame of the 70 years is obscure.

It seems the prophecy of the fall of Tyre is that Tyre will not be restored until 70 years later. Tyre had been prominent in not only their commercial enterprise, but in politics as well. This will be no more, until after their restoration.

Sometimes the conditions of the people cannot change until the death of the king and another takes power. The harlot, many times, was a musician, as well as one selling her body.

Isaiah 23:16 "Take a harp, go about the city, thou harlot that hast been forgotten; make sweet melody, sing many songs, that thou mayest be remembered."

A harlot might sing sweet songs to entice the men. This however, is speaking of this city as if it were a harlot. This city had been selfish and worldly, not interested in the things of God.

Isaiah 23:17 "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 commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world upon the face of the earth."

With God's help the city was to return.

The reason they had this problem, in the first place, was because they had eliminated God from their lives. We will find that the problem they had, will bring them to God. We find now, their whole outlook on trade is different.

Isaiah 23:18 "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."

Even Tyre's sinful gain was to support Judah as her colonies once supported her.

Praise God, they have learned their lesson. Their profits from their trade are not used for their own greed now. They have dedicated their work to the Lord. They will have their needs taken care of, but their excess will go to God's work.

Merchandise being holiness to the Lord, means that even their transactions in daily business are dedicated to the LORD.

I know by now, you are asking, how can this help us today? We must realize from this, that without God we are bound to fail. With Christ, I can do all things. When we carry on our day to day lives selfishly, seeking gain for only ourselves, we are headed for destruction.

When all that we do is dedicated to God, and we share with others less fortunate than ourselves, we cannot fail.

Isaiah Chapter 23 Questions

1. What is "burden" in verse 1?
2. Who is this prophecy for?
3. How extensive is the destruction?
4. Tyre was a city of _____.
5. How had the needs of the isle people been furnished?
6. What is the "seed of Sihor"?
7. What does "mart" mean?
8. Where was Zidon located?
9. Why are they saying, they did not birth children?
10. Why was Egypt concerned?
11. Sennacherib was a man of _____.
12. What does "Tarshish" mean?
13. Tyre had been a beautiful city of great _____.
14. Why must they go elsewhere to live?
15. What were the merchants of Tyre like?
16. What had they done wrong?
17. Who brought the trouble on Tyre?
18. Pass through thy land as a _____.
19. What is Chittim?

20. Where was Chaldea?
21. They were natives of _____.
22. How long shall Tyre be forgotten?
23. What was the harlot to do?
24. The problem they had will _____ them to _____.
25. What change of trading practices did they acquire?
26. What can we learn from this lesson?