

# God Reigns

God controls the rise and fall of nations and powers.

Soon millions of people across the United States will vote to elect their government officials on the local, state, and national levels. In a representative democracy, citizens have the power to peacefully maintain or change the leaders and priorities of their government by simply voting to do so. Some nations in today's world display only a facade of democracy; they hold occasional sham elections, but in reality powerful monarchs or oligarchs rule the people with an iron hand.

Monarchy without the benefit of elections was the nearly universal form of government in the ancient biblical world. Consequently, terrible violence often characterized transitions of power. A king might lose his kingdom (and life!) to a strong usurper, and those who maintained loyalty to the former king would be executed. If a king's son inherited the throne, competitors and citizens alike watched closely to see if the son followed the same policies as his father or took a turn for the worse.

In Isaiah 23, the prophet Isaiah delivered a judgment prophecy against Tyre, a fortified island-city on the Mediterranean coast of Phoenicia [fih NISH ih uh] (modern Lebanon). This prophecy concludes a series of oracles in chapters 13–23 that is sometimes referred to as “the oracles against the nations.” These messages were meant to remind God's people as well as the people in those surrounding nations that the Lord is ultimately sovereign over all the world's nations past, present, and future. Nations and powers rise and fall in the course of human history. All of them—then and now—are ultimately accountable to God. As the apostle John described in his vision of the end times: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:15).

As you study this session's Bible passage, reflect on its meaning for the nations of the world today, including the United States of America. What warnings does the passage offer? What encouragement and guidance does it give to us as believers and as citizens? How might your attitudes and actions need to change based on the reality that God controls the rise and fall of all nations and powers?

# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ISAIAH 13:1–23:18

The Old Testament people of God did not live in a political vacuum. The promised land lay at the crossroads of powerful empires and regional kingdoms on every side. Further, Israel itself split into two rival kingdoms—the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah—following the death of King Solomon (see 1 Kings 12:1-19). Both kingdoms at times had rulers who acted wickedly and rebelled against the Lord, inviting His judgment. The Lord often used the pagan nations surrounding the promised land as the agents of His punishment against His wayward people.

In Isaiah 13–23, however, the Lord made clear that the pagan nations and empires He used as instruments of His judgment would also face accountability. Isaiah’s prophetic messages in these chapters not only outline God’s judgment against wicked empires and idol-worshiping nations but also describe His plans to restore Israel and Judah (after they are punished) and advance His messianic kingdom.

In 13:1–14:23, Isaiah announced God’s judgment against Babylon. By 612 BC, the Babylonians would conquer and supersede the Assyrian Empire and go on to become the future destroyer of Judah and the temple of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Many survivors of Jerusalem’s destruction would be taken into captivity in Babylon. Nevertheless, in time Babylon also would face God’s judgment. The “jewel of the kingdoms” would become “like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them” (13:19). At the same time, God would rescue His captive people Israel and restore them to the promised land (14:1-2). Isaiah closed chapter 14 with brief pronouncements against the Assyrian Empire (14:24-27) and Philistia (14:28-32).

In 15:1–16:14, Isaiah described the judgment of God that would fall on Moab, a small, neighboring kingdom located east of the Jordan River opposite the city of Jericho. Moab was proud of its agriculture and wealth, but its pride would be trampled and its population depleted.

Chapter 17 contains three oracles, a brief one against Damascus, the capital of Aram, or Syria (17:1-3), one concerning Israel (17:4-11), and a brief oracle against “the nations” in general (17:12-14). The nations that rage against and plunder God’s people will one day be blown away like chaff (17:13).

Chapters 18–20 focus on two ancient kingdoms on the African continent, Cush and Egypt. While sometimes identified as Ethiopia, Cush more likely is to be identified with the ancient kingdom of Nubia that lay just south of Egypt along the Nile River. Its people had a reputation of being “tall and smooth-skinned,” being fierce in battle, and speaking “a strange language”

(18:2). Surprisingly, God’s judgment on the Cushites would lead to their bringing an offering to the Lord in Jerusalem (18:7).

Isaiah prophesied that Egypt would also bow to the sovereign judgment of the Lord (19:1). Civil war and economic disasters would devastate the land; Egypt’s pharaohs and tribal chieftains would be helpless to rescue the nation (19:2-15). Although Egypt would one day submit to an alliance with Judah—adopting the language of Canaan in five of its cities, building an altar to the Lord, even worshiping the Lord and making vows to Him (19:16-23)—eventually Assyria would conquer the lands of Egypt and Cush (20:1-6).

In chapter 21, Isaiah delivered a second judgment warning concerning Babylon (21:1-10), then issued two oracles about Dumah (21:11-12)—a name either for Edom or a trade route oasis in northern Arabia—and the kingdom of Arabia (21:13-17). By 689 BC, Assyria would dominate all the tribal groups in these areas.

In chapter 22, the prophet issued an oracle against Jerusalem, sarcastically referring to the city as “the Valley of Vision” because the city and its leaders trusted more in human weapons and survival schemes than in the Lord (22:1-14). They also received a proclamation of doom (22:1-14). The chapter closes with an unusual oracle concerning a royal official in Jerusalem. Shebna, the king’s palace steward, was using his position to selfishly promote himself. The Lord would oust Shebna from his position and replace him with a faithful servant named Eliakim (22:15-25).

Isaiah ended his oracles against the nations section with a pronouncement against Tyre (23:1-18). Steeped in international trade by land and sea, Tyre—along with Sidon, its sister city to the north—became extremely wealthy and influential to the point of arrogance. Isaiah prophesied that Tyre would one day lose all its wealth and “be forgotten for seventy years—the life span of one king” (23:15). Further, after the seventy years the Lord would restore Tyre to its former glory with one significant difference: the city’s profits would be dedicated to the Lord (23:17-18)!

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

### **GOD IS JUST** (Isa. 23:8-12)

Isaiah 23:1-7 introduces God’s judgment against Tyre. The main island-city was an international center for trade and was fortified to be nearly impregnable by land or sea. Nonetheless, Isaiah stressed that Tyre’s downfall would come because God decreed it.

## VERSE 8

### **Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose traders are princes, whose merchants are the honored ones of the earth?**

The entirety of verse 8 comprises a question, but the heart of the question lies in the first five words—**who planned this against Tyre**. The word *this* points to the future (from Isaiah’s viewpoint) when Tyre would suffer the destruction God decreed against all of the idolatrous Canaanite cities (23:11; see Lev. 18:24-25). The Assyrian army attacked Tyre around the time that they successfully conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC. However, the Assyrians were forced to withdraw from their siege of Tyre after five years without conquering the city.

The sixth century BC prophet Ezekiel later announced that the Babylonian army under King Nebuchadnezzar would come against Tyre (see Ezek. 26:1-14). They did so after destroying the city of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Yet, Babylon was unable to conquer Tyre even though Nebuchadnezzar’s forces besieged the island fortress for thirteen years! Thus, if these two powerful empires could not bring Tyre into submission, who could? About one hundred and fifty years prior to Ezekiel’s time, the prophet Isaiah emphasized that only the sovereign Lord God could plan Tyre’s accountability.

Isaiah gave three descriptions of Tyre. First, Tyre was **the bestower of crowns**. This description likely refers to Tyre as a wealthy, powerful city that could make or break the success of kings. The city’s broad international influence was not so much military or political as it was economic.

Second, Isaiah described Tyre as a city **whose traders are princes** (“whose merchants were princes,” ESV). On one hand, this phrase could mean that Tyre was such an elite commercial center that nations sent no less than their royal sons there to make trade deals. On the other hand, the phrase could mean that the merchants of Tyre were viewed as and treated like royalty. In either case, the description emphasizes the powerful role of Tyre’s merchant class.

Third, Isaiah further described Tyre as a city in which its **merchants were honored ones of the earth** (“renowned in the earth,” NIV). That is, Tyre’s merchant class enjoyed a worldwide reputation of honor. So many nations had much to gain or lose based on Tyre’s future. Thus, Isaiah wanted his audience to consider who could be powerful enough to plan Tyre’s destruction.

## VERSE 9

### **The LORD of Armies planned it, to desecrate all its glorious beauty, to disgrace all the honored ones of the earth.**

Here Isaiah answered the question he raised in verse 8: **the LORD of Armies planned** Tyre's future destruction. The title *LORD of Armies* ("LORD of hosts," KJV) describes God as Commander-in-chief over heaven's host—whether angelic armies (Zech. 14:5; Rev. 19:14) or the very stars of heaven (Isa. 40:26).

The Lord would **desecrate all its glorious beauty** ("stain the pride of all glory," KJV; "defile the pompous pride of all glory," ESV; "bring down her pride in all her splendor," NIV). Furthermore, God would **disgrace** ("bring into contempt," KJV; "dishonor," ESV; "humble," NIV) the city's powerful elites. Tyre was a leading commercial city in the ancient world. Wealthy merchants and royal emissaries came there from many places to secure trade deals and hobnob with other powerful people. The city gained a reputation for its unparalleled splendor and unbridled arrogance. However, the city would not stand before God's sovereign judgment.

## VERSE 10

**Overflow your land like the Nile, daughter of Tarshish; there is no longer anything to restrain you.**

Interpreters connect Isaiah's reference to the **daughter of Tarshish** with merchants who came from the region of modern Spain. Tarshish lay at the western end of the Mediterranean Sea, while Tyre lay at its eastern end. It is unclear whether Tarshish was a commercial competitor of Tyre or a distant city under Tyre's economic dominance. Either way, Tarshish would be mightily impacted by Tyre's fall.

The Hebrew verb rendered **overflow** ("pass through," KJV; "cross over," ESV; "till," NIV) can depict a river's spilling over its banks and, figuratively, the invasion of an army or the sudden influx of refugees. The accompanying phrase **like the Nile** gives an even more vivid word picture. In Egypt, the annual flooding of the Nile River proved vital for that nation's agricultural economy. At the same time, flooding can have a devastating effect on buildings and living things caught in its path.

Thus, Isaiah may have been depicting a flood of people pouring out of the city of Tarshish into rural lands. There was nothing left in the city to keep them. The people could no longer find work in the merchant trade; neither could they purchase staple goods from Tyre any longer. So they fled to the rural areas to try to survive.

In an alternate view, the phrase rendered **no longer anything to restrain you** could indicate that with Tyre's downfall, Tarshish would be free to expand its influence in the eastern Mediterranean region. On the other hand, Tyre's fall could greatly hinder Tarshish, since ships from Tarshish needed access to an established harbor like Tyre to facilitate its trade (see Isa. 23:1).

## VERSE 11

**He stretched out his hand over the sea; he made kingdoms tremble. The LORD has commanded that the Canaanite fortresses be destroyed.**

The real question for Tarshish and other nations was whether they would recognize that Tyre's downfall was the work of the sovereign Lord God. While the sea might provide a protective buffer from invading armies, it could not stop the Lord's decree of judgment. The same God who controlled the rise and fall of kings and empires also **stretched out his hand over the sea**. Here Isaiah may have been alluding to the Lord's power in parting the sea to deliver the Israelites from the Egyptian pharaoh's chariot army (see Ex. 14:21-28). Such a display of power over the sea **made kingdoms tremble** ("shook the kingdoms," KJV), especially the kingdoms in the land of Canaan according to the testimony of Rahab in Jericho (see Josh. 2:8-11).

Similarly, Isaiah's declaration that the Lord **commanded that the Canaanite fortresses be destroyed** may hark back to the ancient directive in the Mosaic law given to the Israelites as they were about to enter the promised land to take possession of it (see Deut. 7:1-2). Further, the Lord told the Israelites in that day that while His judgment against the Canaanite cities and kingdoms would be accomplished over time, it was certain to occur (Deut. 7:22-23). Isaiah declared that God's judgment against Tyre was still part of God's plan to destroy sin's strongholds.

## VERSE 12

**He said, "You will not celebrate anymore, ravished young woman, daughter of Sidon. Get up and cross over to Cyprus—even there you will have no rest!"**

The Phoenician (Canaanite) city of **Sidon** lay about twenty-five miles north of Tyre on the Mediterranean Sea coastline. Like its sister city, Sidon was a maritime commercial center that possessed great wealth and influence. In the days of the prophet Elijah (ninth century BC), Israel's King Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of Sidon's king, to cement an unholy alliance between the two kingdoms. Sidon would eventually face God's judgment as well. In that day, the city would **not celebrate anymore**. The Hebrew phrase translated **ravished young woman** ("oppressed virgin," KJV; "oppressed virgin daughter," ESV) depicts the panicked city as a young unmarried female having been beaten and raped.

The Mediterranean island nation of **Cyprus** lay about one hundred and fifty miles northwest of Sidon. Isaiah described a scenario in which citizens

of Sidon and Tyre fled to the island in an effort to escape God’s judgment. However, their efforts to evade the Lord’s sovereign plan would not succeed. God’s hand of judgment would extend as far as was necessary. Even on the island of Cyprus the fleeing citizens would **have no rest** (“find no rest,” NIV).

We can count on God to oversee His world with justice. Many times, when we look around and see evil rulers getting their way or abusing others, we wonder why God allows such things to happen. We must remember that we do not see the whole picture as He does. He has assured us that He will hold all rulers and nations accountable to His holy standard. We may not see God work in the timing we desire, yet He is working according to His perfect timing.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Justice” on pages 947–948 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the truth that God is just encourage believers? How does that truth make you thankful that He also is full of mercy? In what ways can (and should) believers be involved in promoting God’s justice in their communities?

## GOD IS ACTIVE (Isa. 23:13-14)

### VERSE 13

**Look at the land of the Chaldeans—a people who no longer exist. Assyria destined it for desert creatures. They set up their siege towers and stripped its palaces. They made it a ruin.**

If the merchants and rulers of Tyre and Sidon still thought their cities would never fall, they needed only to consider recent history in **the land of the Chaldeans** [kal DEE uhnz]. This region, also known as Babylonia (after its capital city, Babylon), at times controlled much of the Middle East, including the land of Canaan. By Isaiah’s day, however, **Assyria**—the region located north of Babylonia—had defeated *the Chaldeans* and then began to project its dominance westward toward the kingdoms of Aram (Syria), Israel, and Judah. The Chaldeans thus **no longer** existed as a ruling power. Their major fortified cities had been destroyed; their **palaces** had been **stripped** of all valuables.

Isaiah pointed to Assyria’s defeat of the Chaldeans as evidence of God’s power in the affairs of His creation. The same fate that befell the Chaldeans awaited Tyre and Sidon. God used the Assyrians as His instrument of judgment against the Chaldeans. He would also use Assyria and succeeding empires as the instruments of His judgment against Tyre and Sidon.

## VERSE 14

### **Wail, ships of Tarshish, because your fortress is destroyed!**

Isaiah repeated his call for wailing by the **ships of Tarshish** (see 23:1). The merchants of Tarshish and Tyre no doubt interacted on many occasions. They had much to gain as trading partners. However, when the **fortress** city of Tyre was **destroyed**, the *ships of Tarshish* would no longer have a safe harbor available to them on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea.

We need to keep in mind that Isaiah's judgment prophecies concerning the nations were also messages directed at God's covenant people. Powerful and wicked nations may dominate the world scene for a time, but the Lord ultimately uses all of them to advance His holy purposes for His creation. God is ultimately in control, providentially directing kingdoms and nations according to His plan (see Acts 17:26). God is at work in the world even when we cannot fully grasp what He is doing.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Providence" on pages 1312–1313 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does belief in God's sovereignty over the nations help you identify His work in the world today? How are you personally encouraged by God's sovereign providence?

## GOD IS HONORED (Isa. 23:15-18)

### VERSE 15

### **On that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years—the life span of one king. At the end of seventy years, what the song says about the prostitute will happen to Tyre:**

The words **on that day** refer to the time of Tyre's downfall by the Lord's decree. From the prophet's standpoint, the day would come at some unspecified time in the future. Isaiah was not revealing a specific calendar date but rather was declaring the divine certainty of Tyre's coming judgment.

Evidence that God's judgment had occurred would come in the form of Tyre's being **forgotten for seventy years—the lifespan of one king**. The once proud, wealthy, influential city would become little more than a dim memory in the history books. Bible scholars have suggested several possible seventy-year periods that might have been the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. One suggestion relates to the period of Assyrian dominance in the

seventh century BC. Another proposal suggests that the period corresponds roughly with the seventy-year exile of God's people following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Isaiah further prophesied that one day Tyre would be restored. The prophet likened Tyre's renewal to **what the song says about the prostitute**. He likely assumed that his original audience knew about this song. In any case, the prophet clarified his intended emphasis in the subsequent verse.

#### VERSE 16

**Pick up your lyre, stroll through the city, you forgotten prostitute. Play skillfully, sing many a song so that you will be remembered.**

To emphasize his point about Tyre's future renewal, Isaiah quoted lines from the song mentioned in the previous verse. The phrase **forgotten prostitute** depicts a prostitute who could no longer attract customers, whether because of age, injuries, or some other circumstance. In the song, however, the prostitute is advised to **stroll through the city**, playing a **lyre** and singing **many a song** in order to prompt her former lovers to remember her.

Why would Isaiah use such a comparison to speak of Tyre's renewal? Hebrew prophets sometimes connected the idea of sexual immorality with idolatry (see Hos. 4:12-14). As a Canaanite city, Tyre was filled with idolatry and pagan fertility rituals. The city would one day be decimated under God's judgment and would no longer attract wealthy merchants and their ships from around the world. The city would become like a *forgotten prostitute*.

#### VERSE 17

**And at the end of the seventy years, the LORD will restore Tyre and she will go back into business, prostituting herself with all the kingdoms of the world throughout the earth.**

Isaiah declared that at the end of the city's period of being "forgotten" (**seventy years**), **the LORD will restore Tyre**. The prophet's emphasis here remained on God's sovereign control of history. The idea is that only the Lord in His judgment could bring down the mighty island-city; likewise, only He could say when (and if) Tyre would be able to **go back into business** ("turn to her hire," KJV; return to her wages," ESV; "return to her lucrative prostitution," NIV). Interestingly, Isaiah prophesied that the city would revert to her former ways, **prostituting herself with all the kingdoms of the world throughout the earth**.

Isaiah's words prompt us to ask some serious questions. Are we sensitive to God's hand in our lives? Do we ask Him to teach us His ways through both

tough times and times of blessing? As the writer of Hebrews urged, “Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. ... No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:7,11).

## VERSE 18

**But her profits and wages will be dedicated to the LORD. They will not be stored or saved, for her profit will go to those who live in the LORD’s presence, to provide them with ample food and sacred clothing.**

Isaiah foresaw that although a restored city of Tyre would return to her old materialistic ways, the Lord would sovereignly redirect **her profits and wages** (“her merchandise and her hire,” KJV) for His purposes. The Hebrew word rendered **will be dedicated** is actually a noun meaning “holy things” or “set-apart things.” In the Old Testament, the principle of holy war called for a city under God’s judgment to be “set apart to the LORD for destruction” (Josh. 6:17). The city’s monetary wealth was to be “dedicated to the LORD and ... go into the LORD’s treasury” (Josh. 6:19).

Tyre’s renewed wealth would **not be stored or saved** (“hoarded,” ESV) but rather would be used to **provide ... ample food and sacred clothing** for the Lord’s priests in Jerusalem. Isaiah did not reveal how the Lord would fulfill this prophecy concerning Tyre. Perhaps it found partial fulfillment when Tyre and Sidon participated in the temple’s rebuilding in Ezra’s day (see Ezra 3:7). The prophet Haggai also spoke of a day when the wealth of nations would fill God’s house in Jerusalem with glory (Hag. 2:6-9).

Scripture affirms that God controls the rise and fall of nations and powers. Further, He always acts justly, holding sinful people, rulers, and nations accountable. The good news is that in Jesus Christ, God has graciously provided sinners the way to be forgiven and restored to a new life of obedience and hope. May we as believers align ourselves with His sovereign purpose to take the gospel to all the nations and make disciples. To God be the glory!

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Gentiles” on page 630 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Note the apostle Paul’s burden to reach people of every ethnic group with the gospel. How would you characterize the level of your commitment to reach people of other ethnicities with the gospel? How could you strengthen that commitment?