

## THERFIELD CHAPEL

Sunday 11th September 2005 18:30

### Isaiah 47:1 to 48:22

#### NO PEACE FOR THE WICKED

Isaiah 47:1 to 48:22

##### The destruction of Babylon (47:1-15)

- Declaration of judgement (47:1-7)
- Description of judgement (47:8-15)

##### A declaration to Israel (48:1-22)

- Reason for Israel's chastisement (48:1-11)
- Liberation by a Gentile deliverer (48:12-16)
- Sorrow over Israel's disobedience (48:17-19)
- Instructions to flee from Babylon (48:20-22)

*"Go down, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, Daughter of the Babylonians. No more will you be called tender or delicate. [2] Take millstones and grind flour; take off your veil. Lift up your skirts, bare your legs, and wade through the streams. [3] Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one." [4] Our Redeemer-the Lord Almighty is his name-is the Holy One of Israel. [5] "Sit in silence, go into darkness, Daughter of the Babylonians; no more will you be called queen of kingdoms. [6] I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance; I gave them into your hand,*

*and you showed them no mercy. Even on the aged you laid a very heavy yoke. [7] You said, 'I will continue forever - the eternal queen!' But you did not consider these things or reflect on what might happen.*

*[8] "Now then, listen, you wanton creature, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.' [9] Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells. [10] You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, 'No one sees me.' Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me.' [11] Disaster will come upon you, and you will not know how to conjure it away. A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom; a catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.*

*[12] "Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have laboured at since childhood. Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will cause terror. [13] All the counsel you have received has only worn you out! Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you. [14] Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame. Here are no coals to warm anyone; here is no fire to sit by. [15] That is all they can do for you - these you have laboured with and trafficked with since childhood. Each of them goes on in his error; there is not one that can save you.*

*[48:1] "Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel - but not in truth or righteousness - [2] you who call yourselves citizens of the holy city and rely on the God of Israel - the Lord Almighty is his name: [3] I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass. [4] For I knew how*

*stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze. [5] Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.' [6] You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? "From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. [7] They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, 'Yes, I knew of them.' [8] You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ear has not been open. Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth. [9] For my own name's sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to cut you off. [10] See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. [11] For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another. [12] "Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel, whom I have called: I am he; I am the first and I am the last. [13] My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together. [14] "Come together, all of you, and listen: Which of the idols has foretold these things? The Lord's chosen ally will carry out his purpose against Babylon; his arm will be against the Babylonians. [15] I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission.*

*[16] "Come near me and listen to this: "From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there." And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me, with his Spirit. [17] This is what the Lord says - your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. [18] If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea. [19] Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be cut off nor destroyed from before me."*

*[20] Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, "The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob." [21] 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 water gushed out. [22] "There is no peace," says the Lord, "for the wicked."*

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Today is September the 11th - a date better known around the world as simply 9/11. It's the fourth anniversary of the events in America, in 2001, when passenger jets were hijacked and piloted into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon Building in Washington DC, killing around 3000 people.

It was the event which triggered the invasion of Afghanistan, in an attempt to flush-out Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda movement who claimed responsibility for 9/11, and the invasion of Iraq - modern day Babylon - for reasons which are still the subject of heated debate, but which mostly centre around alleged support for terrorism.

So it is, perhaps, fitting that today we turn to a passage in the Book of Isaiah which starts with God's judgement against Babylon and a prophecy about its destruction.

At the time of Isaiah's writing of these words, spoken by God himself, Judah - the Jews - were either in the captivity of the Babylonians, or shortly to be taken captive ... it's difficult to be completely precise about the dates. At the time, Babylon was a nation under King Nebuchadnezzar: nowadays it is merely a town in Iraq. God allowed Judah to be conquered and taken captive by Babylon as a chastisement for

their disobedience to him. But that didn't automatically make Babylon the good guys ... they too would suffer punishment for their treatment of Judah.

It's difficult for us - well for me at least - to fully understand God's thinking on this. He uses one set of bad guys - the Babylonians - to punish another set of bad guys - the Jews - and then punishes the Babylonians for punishing the Jews! I think it reinforces what we know already - that in God's eyes we are all a disobedient people, and all deserving of punishment. The essential difference was that the Jews were God's chosen people - chosen to be the nation into which the Messiah would be born some 600 years later. God also had a Covenant with the Jews - the Covenant of Moses - whereas he did not have a covenant with Babylon. And for those reasons, Judah would need eventually to be rescued from Babylonian captivity.

There's a kind of dilemma here which I guess is sometimes faced by those of you who are parents. Your own naughty children get mixed up with a gang of even naughtier children. Your first concern is, naturally, for your own children. So you go and grab them by the scruff of the neck and drag them away from the gang. On the one hand, you're showing love for your own kids by rescuing them from the bad bunch - and on the other hand you'll punish them - probably ground them for a week - for mixing with the bad kids that you've warned them about, time and time again. When that's sorted out, you may then want to go and do something about the gang who were leading your kids astray. It's all a grey area. No-one is perfect. No-one is fully innocent, and no-one fully to blame. You, as a parent, have to do the best for your own children: and that will often mean rescuing them from bad situations but still having to chastise them for getting into trouble in the first place.

And if you're nodding in agreement and thinking to yourself "Who in their right mind would be a parent?" Then ask yourself this: "Who in their right mind would want to be God!"

In tonight's passage of Isaiah - as you can see from the outline on the screen - God is promising to do the parental things we've just thought about, but not necessarily in the same order. He is foretelling the captivity in Babylon, he is foretelling the rescue from captivity and he is foretelling both the punishment of the Babylonians and of his own people - the Jews. Remember that this is all some 100 or more years before it actually happened.

Firstly in chapter 47, verses 1-7, we get God's judgement against Babylon. *"Go down, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, Daughter of the Babylonians. No more will you be called tender or delicate.*

Angry words. It's not often you see Babylon described as a virgin in the Bible! Later in the book of Revelation, Babylon is described as a whore - a prostitute ..... that's some change! In Isaiah's time, Babylon had never been conquered by anyone else; it was well fortified and its inhabitants so well sheltered from outside aggression that they could rightly be described as tender and delicate. God warns them that it's all going to change. [3] *Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one.*"

And why? What reason does God give for treating the Babylonians this way? Verse 6: *I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance; I gave them into your hand, and you showed them no mercy. Even on the aged you laid a very heavy yoke.*

Even though God had deliberately allowed his own people of Judah to be taken captive by Babylon, he is angry that the Babylonian treatment of the Jews was too harsh. Maybe mere captivity would have been sufficient. So now God promises to repay their harshness with a harsh punishment.

*[47:8] "Now then, listen, you wanton creature, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.' [9] Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells.*

Babylon thought that she could never be defeated. But the Lord said that she would lose her children and become a widow.... on a single day.

Babylon thought she was unique: "I am, and there is none besides me".

Babylon prided herself in her sorcerers who supposedly told the future and cast spells to influence others. Such supposed knowledge, however, was unreliable, for the sorcerers could not foresee Babylon's forthcoming calamity and would not be able to conjure it away. The Lord mockingly urged the Babylonians to keep on with their spells and sorceries. In sarcasm he suggested the astrologers and stargazers save them. Astrology was common in Babylon but those religious leaders could not save even themselves, let alone Babylon.

And did it all happen? Was Babylon the undefeated finally overthrown as God foretold through Isaiah? Yes of course. Some 150 years later, The neighbouring Persian Empire overthrew Babylon. And that was good news for Judah, as it marked the start of the process which eventually allowed them to return to Jerusalem.

As with many prophecies in the Bible, there is also a possibility that a more full and future fulfilment of this prophecy is yet to come. The book of Revelation, as I mentioned earlier, talks about the defeat of Babylon too ..at the time of the second coming. In that context, it's difficult to know if the word "Babylon" is just used as a generic name for the enemies of God, or whether it actually refers to the geographical place in Iraq. Now that the secular government of Saddam Hussein has been removed in Iraq, it leaves the way open for a new Islamic State to be formed ... and I suspect that the government of that state will be more extremist Muslim than would ever have been allowed under Saddam. Time will tell.

So chapter 47 dealt with the prophecy of the captivity in Babylon, the mistreatment of God's people by the Babylonians, the eventual overthrow and punishment of Babylon and the rescue of God's children from the bullies of Babylon.

Moving on to chapter 48, God now prophetically speaks to the people of Judah through Isaiah. And lets return for a moment to our analogy of parents taking their naughty children away from the gang of even naughtier children and sorting the situation out. As parents, you may well chastise your children for getting involved with the wrong crowd. If you're a good parent, you'd explain to your children why you're punishing them, why you separated them from the gang of bullies and give them guidance as to how to avoid such situations in the future.

We would expect no less from our loving Father-God. And this is what he does in chapter 48. You'll see from the screen the four messages that God has for Judah.

**Firstly**, why was God punishing Judah by allowing them to go into captivity in the first place?

*48v1: "Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel - but not in truth or righteousness - your ear has not been open. Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth.*

Judah was disobedient, it had not heeded God's warning, it was not acting like a family member, it was not listening to its Father. When children don't listen to the warnings of their parents: trouble is sure to follow ... as I'm sure we all know! And the captivity in Babylon was the punishment that God had pre-ordained to teach Judah a lesson about obedience and faithfulness. And it wasn't as if God hadn't given them sufficient warning. Way back, hundreds of years earlier, the prophetic Psalm 137 says this .. and yes it is difficult to read the words without humming the Boney M tune!

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion[2] There on the poplars we hung our harps, [3] for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" [4] How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? [5] If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. [6] May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. [7] Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!" [8] O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us - [9] he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

"Don't say I didn't warn you" says the parent to the child.

"Oh that stuff is all folklore and fairy-tales" replies Judah. You don't scare us with your old tales about the bogey-man!

"OK" says God. "If you think my previous prophecies were just fairy-tales, let me give you a new one, and then you won't be able to say it's all folklore and myth. You will be in captivity in Babylon, as I told you many years ago, but what I haven't previously told you is this: you will be released from that captivity and Babylon will be defeated - but not by your own efforts. I will choose an ally from outside Israel - a Gentile nation - to do this. Now when this happens, perhaps you'll believe me!"

Then God actually explains why he's doing this. Verses 9-11: The Lord would delay his wrath, that is, withhold it so his people could return to Judah. This would be for his own name's sake. The exile was to refine them so they would return to their own land in belief. The captivity was like being in a furnace, to test them, not destroy them. There's a clear comparison here with some familiar words from 1 Cor. 3:13 *his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. [14] If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. [15] If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

It's a familiar and repeating theme in scripture, but one which Israel and we ourselves are often forgetful of. The captivity in Babylon and the eventual escape during the destruction of Babylon is sometimes referred to as the Second Exodus. I'd prefer to call it the third Exodus. Remember how the faithful few of Noah's family were saved from the flood which destroyed the world? Isn't that a first exodus? Then The Exodus itself: the escape from Egypt through the Red Sea - a second exodus. And now the escape from Babylon - a third exodus. Are there more to come? Maybe the refining through fire that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians is another exodus. And what about the rapture at the second-coming? Yet another exodus of the faithful before destruction comes. As always, Israel's history teaches us much about the pattern in which God treats his people. If only we were quicker to learn from it.

Israel's lack of ability to learn are highlighted in verses 17-19 of chapter 48: *This is what the Lord says - your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. [18] If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea. [19] Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be cut off nor destroyed from before me."*

In other words: "If you had listened to me in the first place, none of this trouble would have happened" ... familiar words from parent to child if ever I heard them!

The last little section: verses 20-22 are further guidance for avoiding trouble in the future. After the destruction of the oppressive Babylonian regime, it would have been so easy for Judah to have stayed in the newer, friendlier state created by King Cyrus and the Persians. But God has to remind Judah that their home is Jerusalem, not Babylon. There is work to be done. The temple needs to be rebuilt and a nation of Israel to be re-founded. Even though Cyrus was friendly, he was not of the family of God, and there would have been a temptation for Judah to have integrated with the Persians, in the same way that they had partially integrated with the paganism of Babylon.

So they were to remember their roots and return to Jerusalem at the first opportunity.

And we too must not forget our roots. Our home is the Kingdom of God, and, one day, we shall be called home to it. Let us persist in obedience to God, let us be ready for his call. Let us not get too comfortable living our lives here, calling ourselves by God's Name - Christians - but living too much like the secular world around us. There is no peace for the wicked, but there is joy in the salvation that comes through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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