

Session 21

Isaiah 23:1-18 | The Burden of Tyre: Commerce Humbled and Consecrated

Isaiah Oracle by Oracle / Dr. Randy White

Isaiah 23 closes the long collection of burdens against nations and cities in Isaiah 13-23. The final oracle addresses Tyre, the great Phoenician port whose ships, merchants, and colonies tied kingdoms together through trade. Its fall therefore sends grief far beyond one city. Sailors howl, coastlands fall silent, Egypt is pained, and Tarshish loses the commercial power that had ordered its world.

The chapter does not present Tyre's collapse as an accident of war or economics. The LORD purposes it in order to stain the pride of human glory and bring the honorable of the earth into contempt. Yet destruction is not the last word. After seventy years Tyre returns to trade, and her merchandise is finally described as **“holiness to the LORD.”** Wealth that had magnified the merchant city will supply those who dwell before the LORD. The passage moves from commerce as a source of pride to commerce placed under God's purpose.

The fall announced from the sea (vv.1-5)

- **Verse 1 - The ships of Tarshish receive news that Tyre has been laid waste.** The oracle begins with the grief of vessels whose commercial home is gone.
 - **“The burden of Tyre”** names the principal Phoenician city addressed in the chapter. Tyre occupied both a mainland settlement and a strongly defended island site off the coast.
 - **“Howl, ye ships of Tarshish”** addresses long-distance merchant ships. *Ships of Tarshish* can describe a class of large trading vessels even when Tarshish itself is also treated as a real western destination.
 - **“For it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no entering in”** pictures the loss of harbor, home, and access. The ships may still be at sea, but the commercial center to which they would return is unavailable.
- **“From the land of Chittim it is revealed to them”** places the report in the direction of Cyprus and the eastern Mediterranean islands. Chittim is closely associated with Cyprus in Genesis 10:4 and later biblical usage, though the name can extend more broadly to western coastlands.
- **Verses 2-3 - The coastlands are silenced because the traffic that enriched them**

has stopped. Tyre and Sidon prospered by moving the produce of other lands across the sea.

- **“Be still, ye inhabitants of the isle”** calls the coast or island world to stunned silence. The noisy activity of a port has been replaced by the quiet of judgment.
- **“Thou whom the merchants of Zidon, that pass over the sea, have replenished”** treats Sidonian sailors as representative of Phoenician commerce. Tyre and Sidon were distinct cities, but Scripture can speak of their people and commercial world together.
- **“The seed of Sihor, the harvest of the river, is her revenue”** most naturally refers to Egyptian grain carried by sea. *Sihor* is associated with Egypt in Joshua 13:3, and **“the river”** commonly points to the Nile.
- **“She is a mart of nations”** identifies Tyre as an international trading center. Her wealth depends upon a network of producers, sailors, ports, merchants, and buyers extending well beyond Phoenicia.
- **Verse 4 - Sidon is ashamed because the sea denies having produced the children now lost.** The personified sea voices the barrenness created by Tyre’s destruction.
 - **“Be thou ashamed, O Zidon”** summons the older Phoenician city to feel the

disgrace and loss of the whole coastal power.

- **“For the sea hath spoken, even the strength of the sea”** allows Tyre, the sea fortress, or the sea itself to speak. The poetry deliberately joins the city to the waters that made it strong.
- **“I travail not, nor bring forth children”** is the language of a mother who now denies having sons and daughters to rear. Judgment makes the crowded maritime world appear childless and barren.
- **Verse 5 - Egypt will be deeply pained when the report of Tyre arrives.** The fall of a commercial partner sends distress back through the network.
 - Egypt supplied grain that became part of Tyre’s revenue in verse 3. The pain is therefore not distant sympathy alone; Tyre’s loss disrupts Egypt’s own economic life.
 - **“As at the report concerning Egypt”** can recall the terror produced by news of Egypt’s judgment. The report about Tyre will cause comparable anguish.
 - The verse shows how quickly confidence in an international system can become shared panic. The fall of one strategic center exposes the dependence of many others.

The joyous and crowning city brought low (vv.6-9)

- **Verses 6-7 - Tyre’s inhabitants are told to flee toward Tarshish.** The ancient, joyous city becomes a source of displaced people.
 - **“Pass ye over to Tarshish”** reverses the normal direction of commerce. The western destination that received Tyre’s ships must now receive Tyre’s fugitives.
 - **“Howl, ye inhabitants of the isle”**

repeats the lament of verse 1 and broadens it from the ships to the coastal population.

- **“Is this your joyous city, whose antiquity is of ancient days?”** sets former celebration and long history against present ruin. Age does not make a city permanent.
- **“Her own feet shall carry her afar off to sojourn”** strips Tyre of the

stability her colonies and shipping seemed to guarantee. Those who moved goods and peoples by sea must themselves become temporary residents in a foreign place.

- **Verse 8 - Isaiah asks who planned the humiliation of the city that crowned others.** Tyre's commercial greatness makes its overthrow seem inconceivable.
 - **"Who hath taken this counsel against Tyre?"** is not a request for the name of an earthly strategist. Verse 9 supplies the answer: the LORD of hosts purposed it.
 - **"The crowning city"** may describe Tyre as a city that established colonies, appointed rulers, or made its leading men royal in status. Its influence reached beyond buying and selling.
 - **"Whose merchants are princes, whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth"** portrays wealth translated into social and political rank. The trader is treated like a prince because the commercial system gives him international importance.
- **Verse 9 - The LORD of hosts has**

purposed Tyre's fall in order to humble human pride. This verse gives the theological explanation for the whole first half.

- **"The LORD of hosts hath purposed it"** places the judgment above armies, markets, and political calculations. The One who commands heaven's hosts also governs the sea lanes and merchant cities.
- **"To stain the pride of all glory"** means to profane or defile the splendor in which men boast. God exposes celebrated glory as unable to preserve itself.
- **"To bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth"** does not say that achievement or commerce is inherently evil. It condemns the human order that turns wealth, reputation, and influence into grounds for self-exaltation.
- Isaiah 2:11-17 announced that the loftiness of man would be bowed down and the LORD alone exalted. Tyre supplies an international and commercial example of that controlling theme.

The LORD shakes the commercial world (vv.10-14)

- **Verse 10 - Tarshish is released to spread through its own land like a river.** Tyre's fall dissolves the restraint once exercised by the mother city.
 - **"Pass through thy land as a river, O daughter of Tarshish"** pictures unhindered movement or overflowing. The colony is no longer held within the old commercial arrangement.
 - **"There is no more strength"** translates a difficult expression that can carry the idea of restraint or girdle. The context favors the loss of Tyre's controlling bond rather than the sudden arrival of strength in Tarshish.
- Political liberation and economic dislocation can occur together. The power that ordered Tarshish's trade is removed, leaving both freedom and instability.
- **Verse 11 - The LORD stretches His hand over the sea and shakes kingdoms.** Maritime power lies under the command of Israel's God.
 - **"He stretched out his hand over the sea"** deliberately reaches into the element Tyre treated as its source of security. Distance from land does not create distance from the LORD's rule.
 - **"He shook the kingdoms"** shows that the effects extend through the political

world connected to Tyre.

- **“The LORD hath given a commandment against the merchant city”** makes destruction an act of divine sentence. The underlying word is associated with Canaan and can also designate a merchant; the KJV fittingly expresses the commercial identity emphasized throughout the chapter.
 - **“To destroy the strong holds thereof”** denies that Tyre’s island fortress, harbors, wealth, or allied network can overrule the commandment of the LORD.
 - **Verse 12 - Oppressed Sidon will find no lasting rest even in Chittim.** Flight can change location without escaping the reach of judgment.
 - **“Thou shalt no more rejoice”** answers the description of the joyous city in verse 7. The pleasure built upon assumed permanence is ended.
 - **“O thou oppressed virgin, daughter of Zidon”** pictures the Phoenician city as humiliated and violated by conquest. *Virgin* emphasizes the city imagined as previously secure from such treatment, not moral purity.
 - **“Arise, pass over to Chittim; there also shalt thou have no rest”** closes off Cyprus as a guaranteed refuge. The coastland that brought the news in verse 1 cannot provide final security in verse 12.
 - **Verse 13 - The land of the Chaldeans supplies a difficult historical example of a people raised up and a city brought to ruin.** The verse warns Tyre that apparently established power can be overturned.
 - The KJV reads, **“This people was not, till the Assyrian founded it for them that dwell in the wilderness.”**
- The supplied word *till* helps the English sentence but does not remove every uncertainty about the relationships among the Chaldeans, Assyria, the wilderness dwellers, and the ruined city.
- **“They set up the towers thereof”** most naturally refers to siege towers or watchtowers. **“They raised up the palaces thereof”** can describe exposing or stripping the palaces rather than constructing them.
 - **“He brought it to ruin”** gives the verse’s controlling comparison. Whether the immediate ruin is Babylon presented as an example or Tyre attacked by a Chaldean instrument, the point is that the LORD can reduce a seemingly established center to desolation.
 - The verse should therefore be taught with its difficulty intact. It is safer to emphasize the comparison Isaiah makes than to build the date of the entire oracle upon one disputed reconstruction of the sentence.
 - **Verse 14 - The ships of Tarshish are again commanded to howl because their strength is laid waste.** The first movement closes where it began.
 - The repetition of verse 1 forms a frame around the announcement of judgment.
 - **“Your strength”** is the fortified commercial center upon which the ships depended. The vessels survive long enough to mourn, but their business and security do not exist independently of the ruined port.
 - Isaiah’s focus is larger than the fate of individual sailors. An entire network discovers that the institution supporting it can disappear by the command of the LORD.

**Seventy years, restored trade, and holiness to the LORD
(vv.15-18)**

- **Verse 15 - Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, according to the days of one king.** The duration of its obscurity is measured rather than endless.
 - **“Tyre shall be forgotten seventy years”** describes a prolonged period in which the city no longer occupies its former place in the commercial memory of the nations.
 - **“According to the days of one king”** may refer to the lifetime of a king or, more probably, one continuous royal order or imperial period. The phrase marks the period as a unified span without naming a ruler from whom every year must be calculated.
 - Seventy years also appears as a measured period of Babylonian dominion in Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10. The parallel is useful, but Isaiah does not explicitly identify the beginning and ending events for Tyre’s seventy years.
 - **“After the end of seventy years shall Tyre sing as an harlot”** introduces the song of verses 16-17. The figure portrays the city’s effort to recover customers, not a commendation of the trade itself.
- **Verse 16 - Forgotten Tyre is pictured as a harlot using music to regain attention.** Commercial recovery requires the city to make herself remembered again.
 - **“Take an harp, go about the city”** portrays public self-advertisement. The once-famous city can no longer assume that the nations are waiting for her goods.
 - **“Make sweet melody, sing many songs, that thou mayest be remembered”** turns reputation into something Tyre must actively rebuild.
 - The comparison is not permission for immorality. It exposes commerce organized around seduction, appetite, and profit without consecration to the LORD.
- **Verse 17 - The LORD visits Tyre and permits her to return to commercial relations with the kingdoms of the world.** Restoration remains under the same sovereignty as judgment.
 - **“The LORD will visit Tyre”** means that He will attend to her condition and change it. The verb *visit* can introduce judgment or favor according to context; here it results in renewed trade.
 - **“She shall turn to her hire”** describes the recovery of commercial income.
 - **“Commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world”** continues the harlot image. Tyre again enters profitable relationships with many nations, but the language keeps the moral danger of her old commercial character in view.
 - Revelation 18 later portrays another wealthy commercial power whose luxury, merchants, and worldwide influence end in lament. The shared pattern is real, but Isaiah 23 addresses historical Tyre and should not be dissolved into Babylon in Revelation.
- **Verse 18 - Tyre’s merchandise will become holiness to the LORD.** The oracle ends not with the abolition of trade but with its proceeds devoted to God’s service.
 - **“Her merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the LORD”** reverses the use of wealth for self-glory. *Holiness* means that what was common or self-serving is set apart for the LORD’s purpose.
 - The phrase recalls **“HOLINESS TO THE LORD”** on the high priest’s golden plate in Exodus 28:36. Zechariah 14:20-21 likewise anticipates a day when ordinary objects in Jerusalem are holiness unto the LORD.
 - **“It shall not be treasured nor laid up”** denies mere accumulation as the final purpose of renewed prosperity.

- **“Her merchandise shall be for them that dwell before the LORD”** directs the wealth toward those who serve in His presence. Trade becomes a means of provision rather than an altar to Tyre’s greatness.
- **“To eat sufficiently, and for durable clothing”** is concrete and bodily. Consecrated wealth supplies food and lasting covering; holiness is expressed in the responsible use of material goods.

Teaching Summary of Isaiah 23

- Isaiah 23 closes the burdens of chapters 13-23 by placing the international commercial order under the rule of the LORD of hosts.
- Tyre is not isolated. Ships, coastlands, colonies, merchants, kingdoms, and Egypt all feel its fall because prosperity has tied their interests together.
- Long history, strategic geography, strong fortifications, and commercial importance cannot make a city permanent.
- The central explanation is Isaiah 23:9: the LORD purposes the fall to stain the pride of human glory and humble the honorable of the earth.
- Commerce is not condemned merely because it produces wealth. The moral question is whether wealth magnifies human pride or serves the LORD’s purpose.
- Verse 13 is genuinely difficult. Its broad force is certain even where its historical syntax is disputed: powers that appear established can be made a ruin.
- Tyre’s seventy years should be treated as a real, measured period without claiming more chronological precision than the passage supplies.
- The LORD governs both Tyre’s humiliation and her recovery. Renewed success is not evidence of independence from Him.
- The final movement from **hire** to **holiness** is the chapter’s great reversal. Wealth once used for self-glory becomes provision for those who dwell before the LORD.
- Isaiah 13-23 ends with neither the permanence of Gentile power nor the inherent evil of material life, but with the nations’ glory humbled and their goods placed under the LORD’s claim.

Summary of the Oracles Against Nations and Cities (Isaiah 13-23)

Isaiah 13-23 has surveyed the powers surrounding Judah and has even brought the burden home to Jerusalem. The nations differ in geography, history, and character, but none stands outside the government of the LORD of hosts. The section moves through imperial power, military alliances, national pride, political office, and international commerce before concluding that every form of human glory must answer to Him.

- **Babylon and Assyria (Isaiah 13:1-14:27)**
- **Imperial power cannot frustrate the LORD’s purpose for Israel.** Babylon’s day of the LORD, the fall of its proud king, and the breaking of Assyria all demonstrate that

the empires used in judgment remain subject to judgment themselves. The section also looks beyond their fall to Israel’s restoration and rest in the land.

- **Philistia (Isaiah 14:28-32)** - **A change of rulers does not provide security from the LORD’s appointed judgment.** Philistia must not rejoice merely because one threatening rod is broken. Political relief can be temporary, while Zion’s true security rests in the LORD who founded it.
- **Moab (Isaiah 15:1-16:14)** - **Pride is judged even while suffering is lamented.** Moab’s cities, refugees, fields, and vineyards are

devastated. Isaiah neither excuses Moab's pride nor treats its pain lightly. The oracle also looks toward a throne established in mercy in the tabernacle of David.

- **Damascus and Ephraim (Isaiah 17:1-14) - Alliances fail when men forget the God of their salvation.** Syria and the northern kingdom joined their strength against Judah, but both would be diminished. Their deepest failure was not diplomatic miscalculation but forgetting their Maker and the Rock of their strength.
- **Cush and Egypt (Isaiah 18:1-20:6) - The LORD rules diplomacy, armies, and the nations sought as allies.** Cush's envoys and Egypt's apparent strength cannot deliver Judah from Assyria. Yet judgment is not the whole horizon: tribute will be brought to the LORD, Egypt will know Him, and Egypt, Assyria, and Israel will share in future blessing under His rule.
- **The desert of the sea, Dumah, and Arabia (Isaiah 21:1-17) - The watchman announces judgments that arrive at the LORD's appointed time.** Babylon falls, Seir is warned that morning and night both come, and Kedar's glory is reduced within one measured year. Human uncertainty does not make the prophetic word uncertain.
- **The valley of vision, Jerusalem (Isaiah 22:1-25) - Covenant privilege does not excuse self-reliance or corrupt stewardship.** Jerusalem sees its weapons, breaches, houses, and waterworks but does not look to their Maker. Shebna is removed for using office to establish himself, while even the faithful stewardship of Eliakim cannot bear unlimited human dependence.
- **Tyre (Isaiah 23:1-18) - Commercial glory is humbled and its wealth is finally consecrated to the LORD.** The fall of the crowning city shakes the maritime world and brings its honorable merchants into contempt. Yet the oracle ends with merchandise becoming

holiness to the LORD and provision for those who dwell before Him.

Controlling Themes of Isaiah 13-23

- **The LORD of hosts rules every sphere of national life.** Armies, kings, alliances, trade routes, natural resources, and public offices remain under His command.
- **Human glory repeatedly becomes the object of judgment.** Babylonian ambition, Moabite pride, Ephraim's alliances, Jerusalem's preparations, Shebna's self-promotion, and Tyre's commercial honor all become substitutes for looking to the LORD.
- **Judah is not exempt from the standard applied to the nations.** The burden against Jerusalem stands within the same collection because revelation and covenant privilege increase accountability.
- **Near historical judgments establish patterns that reach toward a farther horizon.** The oracles address identifiable peoples and crises in Isaiah's world, yet their day-of-the-LORD language, worldwide effects, restoration promises, and kingdom expectations anticipate the final humbling of human power.
- **Judgment serves the LORD's redemptive purpose.** Israel will be restored, Zion will remain His foundation, the Davidic throne will be established in mercy, nations will worship, and even Gentile merchandise will be devoted to His service.

The segment therefore ends with a unified declaration: **The LORD of hosts governs imperial power, military alliances, political authority, and international commerce. He brings human glory low, preserves His purpose for Israel, and will finally place the nations and their goods under His righteous rule.** Isaiah 24-27 will widen this horizon from judgments upon particular nations and cities to the LORD's judgment of the earth and His final reign in Zion.