

# The World Passes Away

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bible reading this morning, and you'll find that in the prophet Isaiah. And if you have one of our church Bibles, let me just tell you, that is, I think, page 576.

Page 576 in our church Bible. And Bob File is preaching to us this morning and returning after a little while to these studies in Isaiah, which we began some months ago. And we come this morning to chapters 13 and 14, which speak of this great day of the Lord that the prophets promise and all that that means.

And these are solemn oracles, as well as, in many ways, greatly comforting ones for the Lord's people. Isaiah 13, verse 1, the oracle concerning Babylon, which Isaiah, the son of Amos, saw. On a bare hill, raise a signal. Cry aloud to them. Wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. I myself have commanded my consecrated ones and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exalting ones.

[ 1 : 26 ] The sound of a tumult is on the mountains as of a great multitude. The sound of an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together. The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle.

They come from a distant land, from the ends of the heavens. The Lord and the weapons of his indignation to destroy the whole land. Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come.

Therefore all hands will be feeble. And every human heart will melt. They will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them. They will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another.

Their faces will be aflame. Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it.

The stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light. The sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity.

[ 2 : 33 ] I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless. I will make people more rare than fine gold and mankind than the gold of Ophir.

Therefore I will make the heavens tremble and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. And like a hunted gazelle or like sheep with none to gather them, each will turn to his own people and each will flee to his own land.

Whoever is found will be thrust through and whoever is caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes.

Their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished. Behold, I am stirring up the meads against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold.

Their bows will slaughter the young men. They will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb. Their eyes will not pity children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.

[ 3 : 50 ] It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations. No Arab will pitch his tent there. No shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there and their houses will be full of howling creatures.

Their ostriches will dwell. And their wild goats will dance. Hyenas will cry in its towers. And jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand.

And its days will not be prolonged. For the Lord will have compassion on Jacob. And will again choose Israel. And will set them in their own land.

And sojourners will join them and will attach themselves to the house of Jacob. And the peoples will take them and bring them to their place. And the house of Israel will possess them in the Lord's land as male and female slaves.

They will take captive those who were their captors and rule over those who oppressed them. When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon.

[ 5 : 03 ] How the oppressor has ceased. The insolent fury ceased. The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked, the scepter of rulers that struck the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution.

The whole earth is at rest and quiet. They break forth into singing. The cypresses rejoice at you. The cedars of Lameda saying, Since you were laid low, no woodcutter comes up against us. Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come. It rouses the shades to greet you, all who are leaders of the earth.

It raises from their thrones all who are kings of the nations. All of them will answer and say to you, You too have become as weak as we. You have become like us. Your pump is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps.

The maggots are laid as a bed beneath you and worms are your covers. How you are fallen from heaven, O day star, son of the dawn.

[ 6 : 13 ] How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low. You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high.

I will sit in the mind of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will make myself like the most high. But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.

Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you. Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let prisoners go home?

All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb. But you are cast out away from your grave like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those who pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit like a dead body trampled underfoot.

You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land. You have slain your people. May the offspring of evildoers never more be named.

[ 7 : 31 ] Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of their fathers, lest they rise and possess the earth and fill the face of the world with cities.

I will rise up against them, declares the Lord of hosts, and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, descendants and posterity, says the Lord.

And I will make it a possession of the hedgehog and pools of water, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, declares the Lord of hosts.

Amen. May God bless. This is solemn word, the word of the judge of all the earth. Now, could I ask you to turn again, please, to the passage that was read on page 576.

As you're doing so, let's have a moment of prayer. Father, I pray that you will take my words, in all their limitations, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray.

[ 8 : 56 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. On the 30th of April, 1945, Adolf Hitler, in his bunker, deep in Berlin, took his own life, and the Nazi regime came to an end.

Some weeks later, the great preacher, theologian Helmut Tillica, preached in one of the Berlin churches, on what he called Hitler's text. This is what he read.

He read chapter 14, verse 16 of Isaiah. Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?

Julica had no doubt whatever that this passage from Isaiah was not just for Isaiah's own day, it was for his day as well. Seventy years have passed since then, but who can doubt the message is still as relevant and powerful as ever.

Surely when historians look back on the year 2016, they will see it as a year of fundamental change. Six months ago, this country voted to leave the European Union.

[10:23] It will be many years before the consequences of that are worked out. The election of Mr. Donald Trump as President of the United States creates a great sense of uncertainty.

Flexing of Russia's muscles, the Islamic State, all of the refugee crisis, all of these huge events are making people wonder, or making people worried.

Where is history going? Where is the world going? And that's why I've called this sermon today, taking the words from John's letter, the world passes away.

John uses world, they are not in the sense of the world of human beings particularly, not of the accomplishments and achievements of the world, but of the world order as opposed to God.

Babylon, the great city of the world. And in the book of Revelation, we find that Babylon becomes a symbol of all regimes, all world systems.

[11:25] That's a repose to God. And that's why, that's the way we're going to look at this. The world passes away. Now, you should have on your seats one of those little sheets called, Finding Our Way in Isaiah.

Isaiah. Now, trying to summarize Isaiah on a side of A5 is a futile attempt. Some of you may have come across the book 1066 and all that, which contains gems such as sum up the career of Napoleon Bonaparte using no more than ten words.

Well, trying to put Isaiah on a side of A5 is rather like that. But it may be of some help. Particularly, look at the structure, the last point there.

Isaiah, we're coming to the second major section of Isaiah, the God and the nations, chapters 13 to 27. It's no accident at all that these are sandwiched between two kings of Isaiah's time who were faced with great international crisis.

One of them, Ahaz, failed to trust God and trusted in political alliances instead. But Isaiah said to him, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all.

[12:43] Then at the other end, 30 years later, his faithful son, King Hezekiah, faced with a much greater international crisis, trusts in the Lord.

Trusts in him to protect him against the king of Assyria. Now, Hezekiah is to pray in chapter 37. Lord, save us from the Assyrians that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.

So there's the situation. These kings, one of whom trusted in politics and military exploits, another of whom trusted in the Lord. Exactly the same situation as we face in our personal, in our communal, and in our national lives.

So these oracles against the nations show the importance of the whole world. The whole world matters to God. After all, that was the promise to Abraham back in Genesis 12.

In you, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. And then, in the various prophets, we have these long sections of oracles among the nations.

[13:54] In case some of you think we're going to be in Isaiah for the next 50 years, I'm going to be selective here. Today, we're looking at Babylon. In a fortnight's time, we'll look at the other superpower, Egypt, and use these to represent the other oracles.

Not that there's nothing to learn in them, but one of the principles we've always advocated in Cornhill is that you don't preach every part of the Bible in the same way.

So, by looking at Babylon and Egypt, I hope we'll get the message of what God is doing in the world and what God will do in the world. In the lifetime of everybody here, after all, God will still be on the throne when the youngest people in this room come to the end of their lives, unless the Lord has returned before them.

So, this is a hugely important message for today. What is God doing in the world? What's he up to? And our passage, long passage, falls into three unequal parts.

The first part, the judgment on Babylon, chapter 13, and then the judgment on the king of Babylon, chapter 14, verses 3 to 23.

[15:14] And in between is this little section, these two sections of judgment, and in between, a pivot on which the whole passage revolves about mercy, about forgiveness, about repentance.

So, let's look at our passage then. First of all, the Lord judges pride. That is what chapter 13 is about.

The oracle which Isaiah, the son of Amoz, saw. Notice Isaiah is not a political commentator. He's received a message from the Lord about Babylon, about the world.

The origins of Babylon go back to Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel. Let us build a tower whose top will reach to heaven, and let us make a name for ourselves.

A kind of proud self-sufficiency. And here Isaiah is looking to an event which will happen long after his death. Babylon will rise.

[16:13] Babylon will fall. It will be destroyed by the Medes, sometimes the Medes and the Persians. And of course, the area in which our Iranian friends come from, this was the overthrow, the Babylonian Empire.

And you can read about this in the book of Daniel, chapter 5. Daniel says, Those who walk in pride, he is able to humble. It seems to me the key to chapter 13 is verse 11.

I will punish the world for its evil, and I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.

It's a very rich, very detailed passage. We won't be able to go into all the details, but let's try and look at some of the main points. What's being said here? Pride is the human condition, is it not, without the grace of God.

And it's dramatized in the city of Babylon. And the first thing that's being said is, The Lord initiates human events. That does not mean that wars are good.

[17:24] That does not mean that every regime that rises is good. Some of them are downright bad. And all of them are mixed and flawed. But what it does mean is that in the chaos, the apparent chaos of history, in the turmoil of events, the Lord is working his purpose out.

Now, at the time Isaiah is ministering, Assyria is the dominant power. It's interesting that after this very long oracle on Babylon, in verse 24 to 27, we have a very short oracle on Assyria.

And the reason for this, Isaiah came to see that ultimately Babylon was the greater threat. Assyria would destroy the north, the northern kingdom, but ultimately it would be Babylon that would take Judah off into captivity to Babylon.

And it was the greater threat. And so it is today, the Lord controls history. Regimes come and go, prime ministers and presidents tread on the stage for a time, and then they're gone.

But the Lord reigns forever. That is the point. The very heart of Israel's faith. Read the so-called enthronement psalm. Psalms 90 and following.

[18:43] The Lord reigns. The very heart of Israel's faith. And it is a statement of faith. It doesn't look as if the Lord is reigning at the moment, does it? It doesn't. We look at the news.

We look at our own lives. And we have to say by faith. The Lord is reigning. But verses 7 and 8 show us what happens when human power is confronted by God's power.

Verse 7. All hands will be feeble and every human heart will melt. Both physical power, hands, and mental and emotional power, hearts, are impotent when they are faced with God.

And humans have great gifts, great possibilities. The Bible never denies that. But without God, all these powers, all these possibilities come to nothing.

They crumble. That's what we look at Ecclesiastes is about, isn't it? All these things become nothing. Emptiness, futility, vanity. The Lord initiates human events.

[19:50] It appears puzzling and perplexing to us. But the Lord is in charge. The Lord reigns. The second thing is the Lord will bring history to an end.

This phrase, the day of the Lord, which occurs throughout Isaiah, occurs through all the prophets. Sometimes the days are coming, like in the great prophetic vision of the nations coming to Zion, and so on.

The judgments in history point to the judgment on history. I think that is the point. These judgments in history arise and follow for regimes, the sequence of events.

These are all in history. But one day will be the judgment on history, which will be read to us at the beginning from the book of Revelation, the day when all the kings will bow.

And verse 10 is an attack on the kind of idolatrous worship of the heavenly bodies. The stars of heaven, their constellations, will not give their light. The sun will be dark at rising.

[20:58] The moon will not set. It is, don't worship the heavenly bodies. They are controlled by God. God, the Lord of history, controls history. God, the creator, controls the heavenly bodies.

And that's why the only security in these uncertain days is in God himself. And throughout history, this has happened. Remember the determined attempt that King Herod made when Jesus was born to destroy him.

And how it failed. An African poet wrote, Every Herod dies and comes to stand alone before the Lamb who sits upon the throne.

And that's true of every power, every authority in this world and in the one to come. The Lord initiates human events. The Lord controls history and brings it, one day will bring it to an end. And this is focused here on the fall of Babylon. Verse 19, Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah, cities which God destroyed.

[ 22 : 06 ] The world passes away and all its pride, but those who do the will of God remain forever. The world is temporary.

There used to be in Stratford-on-Avon a very wonderful exhibition called The Elizabethan Experience, which was a marvellous audio-visual display of Elizabethan England, particularly based around a visit of Queen Elizabeth I to Kenilworth.

Full of colour, full of light, full of movement. And then at the end, an eerie darkness fell. The lights died out, the music died out, the haunting words of Shakespeare's speech of the seven ages of man echoed into that darkness.

Sadly, that exhibition itself has gone, destroyed by the floods of some years ago. The world passes away. The Lord destroys human pride.

And you'll notice here, I mean, this chapter is full of vivid imagery, human cruelty, verses 15 and 16, the atrocious cruelty of war.

[ 23 : 20 ] Think what we would feel if we were reading this in Aleppo this morning. This brings home the kind of power of these passages. In the comfortable middle-class church of the West, we don't feel the power of these apocalyptic passages so much as those in situations of great fragility, great terror, and great cruelty.

The world passes away. But then we have these little two verses here. In verse 14, 1 to 2, the Lord is full of mercy. The Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will choose again Israel.

Now, like all these passages, the primary reference is to the return from exile, which you read about in the books of Haggai, Ezra, and Nehemiah, all of which books which have been studied and preached on in recent months.

Now, in many senses, these books are very low-key. There is almost a kind of autumnal atmosphere about them.

The nations are not flooding to Zion. The desert is not blossoming like the rose. Where are all these glorious promises? And when are they going to be fulfilled?

[ 24 : 44 ] But the point is, as we saw in these various studies, this is hugely important. If, as Malachi said, the Lord whom you wait for will suddenly return to his temple, there had to be a temple for him to return to.

If the exiles had not returned, if they had not, in the circumstance of great difficulty, rebuilt the temple, rebuilt the city, and started again the worship which had been suspended during the exile, then there would have been a huge gap in the story.

You see, these are assurances that the full promises would one day be fulfilled. That one day, as Wesley sang, joyful all you nations rise, join the triumphs of the skies.

We'll be seeing that, no doubt, in a few weeks' time. And it's so important we realize that at a time like this. I mean, so much of the church today is in the kind of world of Haggai and Ezra and Nehemiah, in the sense of the, in the sense of where are the great promises?

Where is the promise of his coming? Where is the promise of the desert blossoming like the rose? And just two things to notice. First of all, notice once again this Jacob-Israel parallel, which runs through the whole book and which Isaiah in particular is very fond of.

[ 26 : 16 ] Jacob is what we are by nature. Proud, arrogant, deceitful, self-satisfied. Whereas Israel is what God will make us.

You see, Jacob in many ways is Babylon. Babylon. Just as we can so easily become Babylon as well if we allow ourselves to succumb to pride. You see, these oracles against the nations are all addressed to God's covenant people.

Don't be like Babylon. Indeed, Revelation makes that explicit. Come out from among her and don't share in her judgments. You share in her pride.

You share in her judgments. So, Jacob-Israel. This story. Jacob reminding us to be humble. Israel reminding us to be hopeful.

God takes us from Jacob and makes us Israel. But remember, it's a process that will not be completed until glory. None of us are the fully-fledged Israel.

[ 27 : 18 ] Let's remember that. And there's going to be a great reversal. The peoples will take them and the house of Israel will possess them. Rather, in the song of Mary, who will put down the mighty from their seats and exalt the humble.

Not necessarily by captivity as such, but by conversion. That's the way. That is the way God's enemies are very often humbled, isn't it?

God's enemies become his friends. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The kingdom of the child of chapter 9. The kingdom of Emmanuel. The prince of peace, as we sang earlier on, whose power a scepter sways.

The Lord judges pride. The Lord is full of mercy. And now in verses 3 to 23. The Lord judges the prince of this world.

A powerful taunt song over the fall of Babylon. I love the commentaries of the late Alec Matir, who went to be with the Lord just a few months ago.

[ 28 : 29 ] Unfortunately, I don't agree with him in his interpretation of this. He says that this is not a picture of Satan, but a picture of human power. I think it's both.

Behind every tyrant, behind every idolatrous and godless regime, stands a more sinister figure. The prince of this world.

Now, he's already been given a death blow by the cross and the resurrection. But he is still to be finally defeated. Which is why, even though Christ has died and risen again and descended to heaven, things are difficult.

Read Revelation 12 and 13. That is why, in some ways, things are more difficult now than they were then. Because the devil has come down to earth and turned on the church.

And, indeed, on the rest of the world in great fury. The thing to remember about the devil is the devil hates everybody. He doesn't just hate God's people. Read the story of the fall of Babylon.

[ 29 : 29 ] It says, in him was found the blood of the saints and the martyrs. And, significantly, all who died on the earth. The devil wants to bring death and destruction.

So, behind all these, the sinister power of the usurper. The battle of Genesis 3.15. I will put enmity, says the Lord, between you and the descendants of the woman.

Verse 12. How are you fallen from heaven? O day star, son of the dawn. Authorized version has the rather magnificent phrase, Lucifer, son of the morning.

Which has entered, of course, into our thinking and into our literature. So, you see what I'm saying? I'm not saying this is not a human being, the king of Babylon. Just as Tilica saw in the fall of Hitler, the fall of Babylon.

And, you see, in the fall of other godless empires and regimes, the fall of human tyrants. And, the rejoicing over the fall of human tyrants.

[ 30 : 36 ] But, just as God works through human beings, so Satan tries to manipulate human beings. And, here we have a poetic picture, rather like a similar one in Ezekiel 28 of the Prince of Tyre.

Of someone, verse 13. You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven. Above the stars of God, I will set my throne on high. This is the voice that spoke in Eden.

You will be like God. In other words, he wanted human beings to suffer from the same prideful blasphemy as he did himself.

The highest angel, the guardian of the throne of God. The ultimate expression of pride. You see, when humans are under the influence of the devil.

Now, by the way, I'm not saying those who are not Christians are demon-possessed. That's not what I'm saying at all. Paul says in Ephesians, that the prince of the power of the air, the spirit at work in the children of disobedience.

[ 31 : 43 ] In other words, those who do not own allegiance to Christ, own allegiance to the usurper. Very often good, decent, honorable people.

But, they're in the sphere of the prince of this world. The prince of the power of the air. They're not following the one who humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross. They follow the one who exalted himself and was humbled. So, you see, every Tyrant, Hitler, Herod, Sennacherib, whom the Assyrian, whom Hezekiah is to face in faith, later on in the book.

And so it is here. And the actual end of Babylon, verse 16 again, is this the man who made the earth tremble. Who shoot kingdoms, who made the world like a desert, overthrew its cities, who didn't let his prisoners go home.

Sheol, the grave, judgment. There are no proudful distinctions there. The end of all world power.

[ 32 : 52 ] And it's by the direct action of God. It's not just that evil peters out. Sometimes evil has a ferocious power and feeds on itself.

It's that, verse 22, I will rise up against them, declares the Lord of hosts. And it will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, descendants and posterity.

It will make it a possession of the hedgehog and pools of water. It will sweep it with the ruined destruction, declares the Lord of hosts. Because every tyrant in history is what happens.

So, the Lord judges the prince of this world. Let's end where we began in the streets of Berlin, in the months following the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Nazi regime.

A man called Gordon Rupp, who later became a distinguished Methodist preacher and professor of church history in Manchester, was in Berlin in the months following the downfall of Hitler.

[ 34 : 01 ] And he was walking through the streets on a winter morning like this. And as he passed Hitler's chancellery, it was then in ruins, of course.

It had been destroyed. And on the wall outside, the young mother was feeding her baby. And just as Rupp passed, the child threw his head back and laughed.

The sun came out from behind the clouds. The child threw his head back and laughed. And so reflected Rupp, another child throws his shadow over the empire of darkness.

And who is that child? That is Emmanuel of chapter 7. That's the Prince of Peace, the mighty God of chapter 9. The child who will overthrow his enemies, who will establish his kingdom, and to whom every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

The world passes away, but those who do the will of God remain forever. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we pray that this assurance in the perplexing paths of life, in the difficulties and dangers that the world faces, that the nation faces, that communities face, that we face ourselves, we may indeed look beyond that to the day when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

[ 35 : 39 ] And he will reign forever. Amen. Amen.