

I cannot tell how he will win the nations!

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our reading this morning, and Bob is preaching and continuing his series in the book of Isaiah. So we're going to turn to Isaiah chapter 19.

You'll find that, I think, on page 581, page 581 in our church Bibles. And you'll see it's headed an oracle concerning Egypt.

Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt. And the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight each against another, and each against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom.

And the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their counsel, and they will inquire of the idols and the sorcerers and the mediums and the necromancers.

[1 : 12] And I will give over the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master, and a fierce king will rule over them, declares the Lord of hosts.

The waters of Egypt's Nile will diminish and dry up.

Reeds and rushes will rot away. There will be bare places by the Nile on the bank of the Nile. And all that is sown by the Nile will be parched, will be driven away, and will be no more.

The fishermen will mourn and lament all who cast a hook in the Nile, and they will languish who spread nets on the water. The workers in the combed flax will be in despair, and the weavers of white cotton, those who are the pillars of the land, will be crushed, and all who work for pay will be grieved.

The princes of Zon are utterly foolish. The wisest counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel. How can you say to Pharaoh, I am a son of the wise, O son of ancient kings?

[2 : 21] Where then are your wise men? Let them tell you that they might know what the Lord of hosts has purposed against Egypt. The princes of Zon have become fools, and the princes of Memphis are deluded.

Those who are the cornerstones of her tribes have made Egypt stagger. The Lord has mingled within her a spirit of confusion, and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds as a drunken man staggers in his vomit.

And there will be nothing for Egypt. The head or tail, palm branch or reed may do. In that day, the Egyptians will be like women and tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts shakes over them.

And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians. Everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the purpose that the Lord of hosts has purposed against them.

In that day, there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts. One of these will be called the city of destruction.

[3 : 34] In that day, there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt.

When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians.

And the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering. And they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing.

And they will return to the Lord. And he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day, there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria.

And Assyria will come to Egypt and Egypt into Assyria. And the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day, Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria.

[4 : 36] A blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria, the work of my hands, and Israel, my inheritance.

Amen. And may God bless us. This is his word. In the 19th century, the poet Alfred Tennyson, who was poet laureate, in some of his poems expressed a vision of the future.

This is what he wrote. When the war drums beat no longer, and the battle flags are furled, in the parliament of man, the federation of the world.

And throughout the century, in Victoria's reign, certainly in the Western world, there was a great deal of optimism. The world is getting better and better. It's more civilized.

People are beginning to become more tolerant and more gentle with each other. Well, these hopes vanished in 1914, when the guns broke out on the Western Front, and one of the most savage wars in history took place.

[5 : 55] But, persistently, human beings have felt there is a better world to come. This is what this chapter is about, in fact.

There is a better world coming. There will be a time when the nations will live at peace. There will be a time when all the lands will worship.

But the point is, this isn't going to happen because we are getting better and better. It isn't going to happen because of our advances in science and technology, because of our personalities.

It's going to happen because the Lord God will make it happen. The Lord who created the world, the Lord who loves the world, this is going to happen.

And there's just two things I want to say by way of introduction. And I want to begin at the end of the chapter. You may think that's an odd place to begin, but I will get back to the beginning as well.

[6 : 51] If you look at verse 23, In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come to Egypt, and Egypt to Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

Now think about it. These are about the geographical limits of your knowledge in those days. Egypt in the south, Assyria, Babylon in the north.

We might say from pole to pole or something like that. But in those days, these were the lands you knew about. The so-called Fertile Crescent, the place where the trade routes were, the place where armies came and went.

Isaiah was aware of other places. He talks sometimes about the islands or the coastlands. That's really the lands around the Mediterranean and the Greek islands. And by Isaiah's time, the Greek city-states were flexing their muscles.

And in his lifetime, a little settlement further west called Rome was founded, which was going to become very, very dominant. You see the point? This is not just about Egypt and Assyria.

[8 : 03] This is about the nations of the world. This chapter is about what's going to happen to the nations of the world. That's why I've given it the title, taken from the hymn we'll sing at the end, I cannot tell how he will win the nations.

And we're in that part of Isaiah called the Oracles against the Nations. I said last time, two weeks ago, that I was going to take two representatives of these Babylon and Egypt, the great superpowers.

We'll be picking up Isaiah again in the new year. And I'm not quite sure how we would survive plowing through Edom and Philistia and all the rest of it.

So we're going to take these as representatives of the superpowers. And what we say about these apply to all the nations. You see, Egypt was the old enemy.

And it's very interesting. When you come back now to the beginning of the chapter, when we look at the early verses, we find that it's echoing the Exodus story about how God defeated Egypt and the gods of Egypt.

[9 : 11] And he's appealing to the people of the time and of this time to have faith. Back in chapter 7, Isaiah had said to King Ahaz, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all.

That's the abiding message today. Now, as Assyria and Babylon were threatening, the real danger was making alliances with Egypt. Because Egypt wasn't as powerful as it had been.

It was still a force to be reckoned with. And Isaiah is saying, it's stupid to ally yourself with Egypt. Egypt is futile and ineffective. So, who do we trust?

We come back to that again. So, that's the picture then. We're looking at Egypt, but we're looking at all the nations of the world. This is the message of God to the nations.

And the chapter really falls into two contrasting parts. First of all, in verses 1 to 15, we have the nations judged. And then in verses 16 to 25, we have the nations blessed.

[10 : 16] The nations judged and the nations blessed. So, let's look first of all at the nations judged. An oracle. This is not Isaiah, as I said before.

It's not Isaiah as a political commentator or a foreign correspondent. This is the message from the throne of God. Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud. The Lord's sovereignty over nature.

This is the creator. And in the Psalms, for example, Psalm 18, the Lord rides on a swift cloud to help David in his troubles. And various parts of scripture.

The Lord and his superiority over nature. And, of course, at the end of the story, see he is coming with clouds and every eye will see him. In great advent passage, you get the beginning of Revelation.

Now, Egypt was a very powerful and brilliant nation. It probably captured the imagination of the modern world more than most nations have. Some of you may have visited the Egyptian rooms in the British Museum.

[11 : 19] Or perhaps the National Museum in New York. It's a powerful, brilliant, imposing nation. Tomb of Tutankhamun. If that's how you pronounce his name.

Nobody knows. And it was an imposing nation. So, if Egypt is going to be judged, the whole world is judged. There are three particular aspects of Egypt that are judged.

Verses 1 to 4. Egyptian religion. The idols of Egypt. Verse 1. Will tremble at his presence.

That's the Lord who rides on the cloud. And this takes us back to Exodus 12, verse 12. Where God says, I will pass through Egypt.

And against all the gods of Egypt, I will carry out judgment. I am the Lord. See, the problem about idols and polytheism, many gods, is that it leads to rival factions who support rival gods.

[12 : 21] You see, in many ways, the only basis, in fact, the only basis for the unity of the world is that there is one God who made the world, who made every nation under heaven.

If you have lots of different gods, then inevitably there is going to be factions, there is going to be division, there is going to be hostility. And people will turn to magic.

Verse 3. They will inquire of the idols and the sorcerers of the mediums and the necromancers, spiritism, divination, all these sorts of things.

A kind of irrationalism. It's interesting, isn't it, that the new word of today is so-called post-truth. You know, there is an English word for post-truth, and it's lies.

It's quite simple. People think nowadays you shove the word post in front of something, you've invented a new concept. Now, tell me, those of you who have read Orwell's 1984 will know very well that if you start destroying the language, you'll destroy the concepts behind it.

[13 : 29] So the danger is of living in a world of unreality, a world of lies, a seductive world that seems to promise a lot. And I will give over to the Egyptians, verse 4.

Now, this did actually happen. And one of the Assyrian kings conquered Egypt, but that was the beginning of Assyria's decline because it had overstretched itself. In those days, with the kind of communications that were possible, it was impossible to hold together an empire stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

So Egyptian religion is ineffective. It is foolish to trust Egypt because if you trust Egypt and the Egyptian gods, you will end up in confusion.

That's the first thing. The second thing is economic collapse in verses 5 to 10. Egypt's economy depended on the Nile. The inhabited parts of Egypt were narrow strips on either side of that great river.

And the sea here, the waters of the sea, is probably the delta at flood tide. And this is obviously connected with religion because the Nile is a god to the Egyptians.

[14 : 43] If you read the stories of the plagues of Egypt, the first plague was turning the Nile into blood, the river on which Egypt depended. And verse 6, its canals will become foul.

These are probably irrigation channels which led from the Nile into the pasture lands. And of course, we have the collapse of the fishing industry. Verse 8, the fishermen will mourn and lament.

And the collapse of society as the workers in combed flax will be in despair. Egyptian economy is collapsing. The workers and the pillars, in other words, those who work and the bosses, if you like, they are all alike.

They're alike ineffective. They are humbled as the Nile itself is humbled. Now, obviously, no one wants to see economic collapse. No one wants to see a society devastated.

But yet, Egypt is being taught that simply running the economy well is not the way to a society where people love one another.

[15 : 54] So, Egypt's religion, Egypt's economy. And finally, verses 11 to 15, Egypt's wisdom. Princes of Zon, that is on the east side of the delta, the first large place you would come to if you were coming to Egypt from the north.

And then Memphis, which in verse 13, that's further south. Two great cities at the heart of wisdom. Now, the Bible never condemns wisdom and learning.

I'm the last person likely to attack education. I've been involved in it all my life. Indeed, I'm still involved in it. But the trouble is, many people imagine that what people need is simply education and not transformation, not conversion.

Now, think about the implications of that. What that would mean is, the better educated you were, the more degrees you have, the better person you would be. You would stop sinning.

That's nonsense, of course. We know that. Sinfulness is run through the whole of society, from the best educated to the least educated. And after all, Moses, we are told, in Stephen's address, was educated on all the wisdom of the Egyptians.

[17 : 08] Preachers of my youth used to say, Moses spent 40 years in the desert unlearning all the wisdom of Egypt. I don't think that's true at all. What Moses learned in the desert was that the wisdom of Egypt wasn't enough on its own.

And that is the point. Education, economy, these are all good gifts of God. But when they become idols, they destroy us. I mean, sure, that's the point of Ecclesiastes, isn't it?

As the author surveys all these things and then says, can I make it on my own? And the answer is no. It's all hevel. It's all meaningless without God.

And if we ignore God. So, if we don't begin with the fear of the Lord, our wisdom becomes stupidity.

Remember, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now, the beginning doesn't mean it's the elementary lesson that we learn and then forget about.

[18 : 07] Beginning there means controlling principle. We can never get away from this. Just as this happens in ordinary life, after all, a child learning to count is not in the same situation as Einstein.

But after all, if Einstein hadn't learned to count, we would never have had his brilliance. A child learning to play the piano is not Beethoven. But Beethoven had to learn as well.

A child learning the alphabet is not Shakespeare, but Shakespeare had to learn the alphabet. So, you see, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This controls all our learning.

See what God is saying. Look, remember this book is addressed to the covenant community. He's saying, don't trust Egypt. Don't trust the world.

Don't trust its religion. Don't trust its economics. And don't trust its learning. Because they will let you down. The only one to trust is the Lord.

[19 : 08] If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand firm at all. And as I say, what can be said about Egypt? We say about the nations of the world today as well.

Because this is a prophet who is speaking to his time, but beyond it and to every time. And there will be nothing for Egypt that head or tail, palm, branch or reed may do.

Egyptian civilization, Egyptian learning, Egyptian religion will all collapse. So why trust it? But this leads on to this glorious passage, verses 16 to 25.

The nations blessed. In that day, the Egyptians will be like women. Now, what that means, I suggest, is in that day, the Egyptians will start swaggering in a match of way about the world stage as if they owned it.

I think that's what's meant here. And tremble with fear before the hand that the Lord of hosts shakes over them. The hand of the Lord.

[20 : 21] The power of God. The personal power of God. Used in judgment and in blessing. Fear the Lord. Fear the God of Judah.

Not the gods of Egypt. And you will learn true wisdom. I want to ask two questions. First of all, how will it happen? That's really verses 18 to 22.

Now, there is no such thing as cheap grace here. In that day, there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan.

And notice that in the previous verse, they will fear because of the purpose of the Lord of hosts. Now, five cities is a kind of comprehensive number.

Remember, Isaiah is a poet. Poetry isn't a flowery way of saying something good equally well, say, in prose. Poetry is a way of penetrating into the inner reality behind the appearance.

[21 : 24] And five is simply a comprehensive number. Meaning that Egypt as a whole will turn to God. The world, that the nations, the lands will worship, as the Sermist said.

Now, look at verse, the end of verse 18, this puzzling phrase. One of these will be called the city of destruction. Now, I want to suggest to you at the footnote reading, the city of the sun, is a much better reading.

Now, I'll explain why. This city is also mentioned in Jeremiah chapter 43, where it's called Heliopolis, the city of the sun.

It's the center of the worship of the sun god. The chief god of the Egyptians, Amun-Ra, the sun god. And they worship the sun god as the great disk arose every morning.

And we're afraid as it disappeared into the darkness of the night. But, you see, what the prophet is saying is, that place where the false god, the sun god, was worshipped, that place where people worshipped the creation rather than the creator, that place is going to become the center of the worship of the true god.

[22 : 38] So I think city of the sun is a better reading than city of destruction. So how is it going to happen? Now, in these next verses, we have a wonderful picture of how people come to God.

In that day, there will be an altar to the Lord. Now, an altar, of course, is first associated with Abraham. Abraham builds altars, and it's in Abraham that all the nations will be blessed.

And altars suggest sacrifice and covenant. How will the nations be blessed? They'll be blessed by coming to the true altar, the cross, where Jesus died to forgive the sins of the world.

So, he says, this is where we begin. We begin at Calvary. We begin at the altar. We begin at the cross. In the midst of the land of Egypt, a pillar to the Lord at its border.

Meaning, I imagine, that Egypt will no longer celebrate its false gods, but will proclaim its allegiance to the true God.

[23 : 43] It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts. When they cry to the Lord, he will send them a savior. This is wonderful, I think, because these are the words that were used of how Israel was delivered from Egypt.

Do you know what it's saying? Egypt, who is going to be saved, has to come to God the same way that Israel did. There is no other way to come to God. Right from the beginning of the Bible, there is only one way to God.

Because it's not two ways. It's not the way of works in the Old Testament, the way of faith in the New Testament. Read Hebrews 11 by faith. Faith, Abel, Abraham, Moses, and the others.

We come to God as sinners. We come to God as the savior and defender who delivers us. So you see, we come to the altar.

The Lord will, verse 21, the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians. Whereas the Lord will reveal himself to the world. How is he going to reveal himself to the world?

- [24 : 50] He reveals himself to the world through his word, through his gospel. You see, I find this absolutely fascinating to discover in this poem, the way of salvation.
- Come to the altar. God reveals himself through his word. And the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering.
- They make vows to the Lord and perform. In other words, they will respond to the grace. They will respond to the grace they have seen at the altar to the revelation they've received.
- And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing. See, this is not cheap grace, as I said. This is grace that comes through repentance and humbling.
- Trouble about Egyptian civilization. Need the trouble about human beings in general, and particularly highly civilized human beings, is pride, is it not? Feeling we can do it on our own.
- [25 : 51] We've come of age. I mean, like I mentioned another 19th century poet, Swinburne wrote a poem called Glory to Man in the Highest. For man is a measure of all things.
- That is pride. And that needs to be humble. But notice, he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. That's the point.
- As long as we boast, as long as we're proud in our achievements, whatever these may be, then we cannot receive grace and mercy. So how will it happen?
- It will happen the way it has always happened, through repentance and faith and believing and responding to the Lord. And when will it happen?
- Now, the phrase that's already very familiar in Isaiah and the prophets, in that day. And that is the day of the Lord. That day when the kingdom will come, when Jesus, as we sang, will reign where the sun does its successive journeys run.
- [26 : 54] But it's anticipated now. The day of the Lord has arrived with the first coming of Jesus, with Advent, the season of Advent, as he comes the first time.
- And Paul, in Romans 15, quotes an earlier passage in Isaiah 11. He says this, The root of Jesse will come, the Davidic king.
- He who rises to rule the nations, and in him will all the nations hope. As people come to Christ throughout the world today, wherever land, whatever nation, that is anticipating the day when all the lands will worship.
- The day has come, but it is still future. And the historic enemies are reconciled. Verse 23, where we began, in that day will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria.
- Assyria will come to Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. No rival religions, no rival sets of gods.
- [28 : 01] One Lord and one world, and the nations coming to worship. How is that going to happen? Well, we cannot tell how he will win the nations, how he will claim his earthly heritage.
- But we don't know it will happen. And how do you know it will happen? Because of what we know already. At Advent, the Prince of Glory landed incognito behind the enemy lines in this world, and gave a deadly blow to the serpent dragon, the one behind all false religion and all false wisdom.
- And because of that, one day all the lands will worship. It's interesting, as the apostles in the New Testament, when they talk about the glories of the future, always link it to who God is and what he's done in the past.
- Because he came once, because he came in great humility, when he returns in his glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, on that day he will win the nations for himself.

And that, I believe, is what the prophet is saying in this chapter. Let's pray. Lord God, it is a glorious prospect to think of one united world, composed of those who have come to the altar, had their sins forgiven, and who acknowledge one church, one faith, one Lord.

[29 : 44] We look forward to that day. And as we move through this season of Advent, we thank you that because he came once, that he will come again, and that when he comes again, indeed, all the lands will worship.

We thank you for this in his name. Amen.