

# ISAIAH

## Chapter 21

*Fallen, Fallen Is Babylon*

The oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea. As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on, it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land. 2 A stern vision is told to me; the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam; lay siege, O Media; all the sighing she has caused I bring to an end. 3 Therefore my loins are filled with anguish; pangs have seized me, like the pangs of a woman in labor; I am bowed down so that I cannot hear; I am dismayed so that I cannot see. 4 My heart staggers; horror has appalled me; the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling. 5 They prepare the table, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink. Arise, O princes; oil the shield! 6 For thus the Lord said to me: "Go, set a watchman; let him announce what he sees. 7 When he sees riders, horsemen in pairs, riders on donkeys, riders on camels, let him listen diligently, very diligently." 8 Then he who saw cried out: "Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. 9 And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs!" And he answered, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground." 10 O my threshed and winnowed one, what I have heard from the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you. 11 The oracle concerning Dumah. One is calling to me from Seir, "Watchman, what time of the night? Watchman, what time of the night?" 12 The watchman says: "Morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; come back again." 13 The oracle concerning Arabia. In the thickets in Arabia you will lodge, O caravans of Dedanites. 14 To the thirsty bring water; meet the fugitive with bread, O inhabitants of the land of Tema. 15 For they have fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow, and from the press of battle. 16 For thus the Lord said to me, "Within a year, according to the years of a hired worker, all the glory of Kedar will come to an end. 17 And the remainder of the archers of the mighty men of the sons of Kedar will be few, for the LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken."

**21:1** *wilderness*. The coming judgment would eventually turn Babylon (see v. 9) into a wasteland (cf. 13:20–22). (CSB)

*the Sea*. Refers either to the Persian Gulf, which was just south of Babylon, or to the alluvial plain deposited by the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and their tributaries. (CSB)

Location unclear; may be Babylon, the subject of v 9 (the Euphrates River traversing the flat plains of Babylon may be regarded as a sea). (TLSB)

The valley and plain of the Euphrates and Tigris, where the Babylonian nation had its home. This country had been alternately a desert and a sea, depending upon the season of the year. Great dikes and levees built by Semiramis had served to control the water and make it available for irrigation purposes, but the razing of these dikes again converted the plain into a swampy sea. Cp. Jer. 51, 13. 36. (Kretzmann)

*whirlwinds ... desert*. The desert sometimes spawns powerful winds (see Hos 13:15). (CSB)

Coming up with irresistible force, from the deserts of Arabia. (Kretzmann)

*Negeb*. Desert region south of Judah. (TLSB)

*comes from*. Lit. “it”; it is not clear whether “comes from the desert, from a land of terror” is ascribed to an invader or continues the description of the whirlwinds. (CSB)

THE worst hatred of the Jewish people and the prophets is directed against Babylon, because the Babylonians even laid waste the remnant of that people, that is, the tribe of Judah and the temple. Therefore Isaiah foretells their destruction and the deliverance of the Jews, which was accomplished by Cyrus, the king of the Persians. The prophet cannot forget Babylon even when he begins to speak mainly concerning Christ. Meanwhile, however, many and diverse events intervene. The Jews are harassed by many people against whom he prophesies while his discourse concerning Christ is interrupted. Thus he again speaks about the Babylonians, who perhaps again troubled the Jews after that first prophecy, or else the prophecy is broken up, or the sequence of the prophecies is interrupted. The prophet refers to Babylon by a new name, “the wilderness of the sea,” because of its work, namely, because of its position, not because of its location. He calls it a wilderness, however, in an active sense because it does not lay waste on a small scale but as the sea does, which cannot be resisted. He does not say “of the river” but “of the sea,” whereby he calls attention to cruelty, savagery, and tyranny. Against this wilderness, he says, there will come another wilderness destined to lay it waste. God does not long put up with presumption and reliance placed outside Himself. Just like the whirlwinds in the South that overturn everything, He comes from the desert, from a terrible land. He means the armies of the Persians and Medes, and He also calls them a desert in an active sense, a desert, however, of a terrible land, not of the sea. It is as if the prophet were saying: “The Lord punishes cruelty with cruelty, and out of that land He will deal in a terrible way with the Babylonians.” In Ps. 137:8 we read: “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us!” The wind from the west is moderate, from the east it is dry and harmful, but from the south it overturns everything. (Luther)

**21:2** *a stern vision* – One which he could endure and record only with difficulty on account of its importance and consequences. (Kretzmann)

*traitor betrays...destroyer destroys* – The one who is unbelieving deals faithlessly. More correctly thus: The despiser comes against the despiser, the plunderer against the plunderer. *רָבָה* is the word for one who despises and is brazenly indifferent to everything, and with overbearing contempt refuses to listen to others. Thus in Ps. 25:3, *רָבָה יְהוָה*. Such was Babylon. David says (Ps. 25:3): “Let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous,” *רָבָה יְהוָה*, that is, the despisers. Babylon was *רָבָה*, treacherous, in its confidence. But the king of the Persians put his confidence in God, by whom he was called and sent against Babylon. (Luther)

Babylon. The Lord is stirring up the nations against Babylon to act out His judgment. (TLSB)

*Elam*. The Elamites were a perpetual enemy of Assyria and Babylon. Much later, they were part of the Persian army that conquered Babylon under Cyrus in 539 B.C. (CSB)

Instrumental in the fall of Babylon in 539 BC. (TLSB)

Elam was a son of Shem. From him came the Persians. (Luther)

*she*. Babylon. (CSB)

Namely, Babylon, by which she caused many people, especially the Jews, to sigh. This is a Hebrew way of speaking, just as this statement, “they are justified through the faith of Christ,” means not the faith by which Christ believes, but the faith by which men believe in Christ; as if he were saying, “All sigh and cry over Babylon, so that I can no longer bear it.” (Luther)

**21:3** Vision of Babylon’s downfall strikes Isaiah emotionally. The judgment of the Lord means the victory of the righteous, but the day of wrath is still terrible to behold (2Th 1:6–10). (TLSB)

*filled with anguish, pangs have seized me.* † See Daniel’s reaction to visions in Da 8:27; 10:16–17. (CSB)

The prophet is speaking imitatively. For these are words or feelings or gestures of the afflicted Babylonians, whom the prophet thus ridicules. The power of propagation is in the loins. (Luther)

That is, of death. Joy dilates and relaxes skin, flesh, and bones. Sadness, however, contracts them. The twilight and the night are longed for by the fatigued workmen. Sleep refreshes the fatigued and revives the strength. The most satisfying sleep is in the twilight, whether in the morning or in the evening. Of this sweet sleep, of twilight he says, the horrors and tremblings deprive me. (Luther)

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**21:4** *heart staggers* – Beating wildly. (Kretzmann)

*twilight*. Perhaps the end of the Babylonian empire. (CSB)

End of Babylon’s domination. (TLSB)

*horror has appalled me*. The devastation is beyond even what he had desired. (CSB)

With a terrifying, numbing force. (Kretzmann)

*twilight I longed for* – The darkness of night, which ordinarily was pleasant to the prophet on account of the bodily rest and the conduciveness to quiet contemplation associated with it. (Kretzmann)

End of Babylon’s domination. (TLSB)

*has been turned for me into trembling* – Namely, on account of the horrible vision connected with it in this instance. (Kretzmann)

**21:5** *they*. Babylonians. (TLSB)

*eat ... drink*. With the kind of confident assurance reflected in Belshazzar’s feast (see Da 5:1). (CSB)

*arise ... !* Rhetorically the prophet, who has seen in a vision the coming attack on Babylon, calls on the officers of Babylon to prepare. (CSB)

This is pure irony and fancy. So it is also in Vergil: “They invade the city that is buried in wine and sleep.” Thus the king of Babylon had banquets in supreme security. Nothing was done there except carousing and drinking, etc. It is as if he were saying: “When you say, ‘Slaughter, O cook, etc.,’ then the shout comes: ‘Take the shield,’ that is, suddenly Babylon will be captured. Then first put on the shield; only then, as the secure and idle usually do, get ready what you need to protect yourself.” (Luther)

*oil the shields.* To make supple the leather that covers the shields so that blows from swords or arrows would glance off. (CSB)

Ordinary maintenance. They are unaware of impending doom. The surprise nature of God’s judgment is a repeated motif: Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19:14), Belshazzar (Dn 5), and earth’s inhabitants on the Last Day (Mk 13:35–36). (TLSB)

Keep it from becoming rusty and to cause strokes of the enemy to glide off. Thus matters were going on in Babylon, and during all this time its destruction was imminent. (Kretzmann)

**21:6–12** Ancient Israel had different types of watchmen: (1) those who were posted in the fields during harvesttime so that thieves would not steal the crops (5:2); (2) those who patrolled city streets (Sg 3:1–3); and (3) those who were positioned on the city walls, towers, and hills to detect troop movements by the enemy or to admit messengers. Ch 21 refers to this last type (cf Hab 2:1–4; Ezk 3:17; 33:2, 6–7). (TLSB)

**21:6** *Go, set a watchman.* Probably on the walls of Jerusalem. (CSB)

This was added as a sign to confirm the prophecy, so that he might well and sufficiently deride them. (Luther)

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**21:7** *riders, horsemen... donkeys ... camels.* Bearing messengers from afar. (CSB)

Messengers bringing news from distant lands. (TLSB)

Instead of “two-man chariots,” to indicate many teams of horses, asses, and camels. The prophet is himself the watchman, however, seeing what will come to pass, and already setting those events before the eyes and proclaiming them daily. But the smug people have made light of it. Yet the prophet uses such grand and powerful words in order to make the Jews more courageous, because in time of affliction no amount of consolation is enough. The man in the chariot is Cyrus, the king of the Persians. (Luther)

**21:8** *I am stationed whole nights* – In sleepless vigilance, in order to find out about the army which he saw passing on its way to attack the country of Babylon. (Kretzmann)

No ordinary watchman would take endless shifts. Isaiah is constantly watching for the fulfillment of the Lord's promises. (TLSB)

**21:9** *fallen, fallen is Babylon.* See 13:19. Babylon fell in 689 B.C. and again in 539. These words were adapted by John in Rev 14:8; 18:2. (CSB)

Particular instance of the city's demise is uncertain. It may be when Darius the Mede takes over the throne from Belshazzar in 539 BC (Dn 5). (TLSB)

*Babylon.* Repeated attempts to gain independence from Assyrian domination failed. In 689 BC, Sennacherib captured and sacked the rebel city. However, it later became the center of the empire that was to swallow up Judah. In the NT, Babylon is symbolic of hostility to God. (TLSB)

*carved images...shattered.* The fall of a kingdom meant the disgrace of its gods (cf. 46:1–2). (CSB)

Her idols were destroyed. (TLSB)

**21:10** *threshed.* Judah would be punished by the Babylonians and taken into captivity (see 39:5–7). (CSB)

God has disciplined His people, removing the chaff so they will be the people He desires. (TLSB)

*threshed and winnowed me.* Threshing was a common metaphor for judgment or destruction from war (see Am 1:3). (CSB)

This is the Hebrew way of saying whatever grain the threshing-floor has, namely, what is to be threshed on the threshing-floor. It can be explained as referring to the Jews, whom the Lord threshed through the king of Babylon, not for destruction but for the purpose of separating the grain from the chaff. Or it can be made to refer to the Babylonians, who were to be threshed by the Medes and Persians at the Lord's command. The world is the Lord's threshing and the daughter of His threshing-floor. (Luther)

Literally, "son of my threshing-floor," the reference being to Israel, as being subject to the severe punishment of Babylon, in which the love of the Lord, however, interferes and guides. (Kretzmann)

*I announce to you* – This is as if to say, "Do not consider me a fool, for what I say will surely come to pass. The Lord has said so." (Luther)

**21:11–12** See Jer 49:7–22; Eze 25:12–14; Am 1:11–12. (CSB)

**21:11** *oracle.* See note on 13:1. (CSB)

CONCERNING DUMAH – Dumah was one of the sons of Ishmael, as we read in Gen. 25:14, who gave names to these regions. Thus also this region was part of the land of the Ishmaelites, or Arabians, and almost all of these Arabians were born of the seed of Abraham by his wife Keturah, and of Ishmael, the son of the slave girl. It is to this region and the people of Dumah, then, that the prophet threatens a calamity that is to come from Idumea. (Luther)

Named after a son of Ishmael; mentioned as a city that was to go to Judah. (TLSB)

*Seir.* A synonym for Edom (Ge 32:3), homeland of Esau's descendants, south of the Dead Sea. Edom is dealt with more extensively in 34:5–15 (cf. 63:1). (CSB)

Suggests that this oracle is toward a region of Edom (Gn 32:3). (TLSB)

This is mimicry on the part of the prophet, imitating the feelings of either the conquered or the conquerors. To me, that is Dumah, there is borne the report of a disaster from Seir, which is Idumea. Edom was called Seir because of hairiness. (Luther)

*watchman* – This is ridicule, as if to say, “How are you doing, night watchmen? How much of the night is left? Is the day near?” The repetition denotes the vehemence of the emotions. The prophet, however, rolls allegory and history together into one. Of the natural night he makes an allegory, which is calamity; as if he were saying, “You people of Dumah, are you still pretending? Have you been afflicted enough?” The watchman answers: “The night will not be over even if the day comes,” that is, the trouble remains and we must be on guard, even though we hopefully look to the coming day. These are the thoughts of the ungodly, who even then can have hope of deliverance. And yet they do not hope but are anxious and cannot foresee the light. The godly, on the contrary, say: “The night will pass away, and a permanent day will follow.” So these people of Dumah despair, even though they may think of peace to come, for they do not believe. (Luther)

The questioner wants to know the time, and a watchman should know the exact answer. (TLSB)

**21:12** The watchman's vague answer shows that the coming judgment will be unexpected. (TLSB)

*Morning ... but also the night.* Perhaps meaning that the long night of Assyrian oppression is almost over, but only a short “morning” will precede Babylonian domination. (CSB)

That is, no sooner would the morning dawn than it would be devoured once more by night and destruction. (Kretzmann)

The watchman's vague answer shows that the coming judgment will be unexpected. (TLSB)

*you will inquire* – These are the words of the despairing and those who refuse to accept comfort. This is not the end of the questioning, they say. The meaning is this: “You ungodly are looking for comfort, and yet you do not believe that you will obtain it.” They say, “We have looked for peace and, behold, there is trouble and disturbance.” The ungodly seek nothing more ardently than peace, but they do not dare to believe that they will have peace; and when they are truly perturbed, they do not have the capacity to expect consolation. The godly, on the contrary, stand fast in the sure Word, which promises peace and consolation. (Luther)

*come back again* – For only by being converted to the God of Israel would they escape the threatened misfortune. This prophecy was exactly fulfilled, for Idumea was plunged from one affliction into the next, with barely a dawn of better days to relieve the night. The way of salvation for Edom as for all other people is that of repentance. (Kretzmann)

When the watchman invited the questioner to ask again, he held out the real hope for those who sought it. Those who have no faith will not return to ask; they will go into the night without hope. But God and His prophet stand ready to share the wonders of His love with all who seeks

it. In some ways this reminds us of the way Jesus used parables. When He spoke parables, those who had no faith and were not interested in spiritual things went away scratching their heads. They never did grasp the meaning of His words and had no faith to prompt them to return and ask what He meant. But the disciples came to Him and asked for explanations, which he readily gave them. (PBC)

**21:13–17** See Jer 49:28–33. (CSB)

**21:13** *Arabia*. The next oracle concerns the nomadic peoples whose main base of operations was the Arabian Peninsula along the Red Sea (13:20; Jer 3:2). (TLSB)

*Dedanites*. An Arabian tribe whose merchant activities are mentioned also in Eze 27:20; 38:13. (CSB)

Tribe known for their trading caravans, based c 200 mi E of the Red Sea. (TLSB)

Among the sons of Ishmael there is also Kedar (Gen. 25:13), who gave his name to the greater part of Arabia. Against this land Isaiah prophesies here. Dedan was one of the grandsons of Abraham, whose territory extended to Kedar. But the prophet wishes to point out the flight of the Arabians from their cities and homes because they have heard the report of their devastating conquerors and because they will not consider offering resistance or taking up arms. (Luther)

*thickets*. The caravans had to hide from the invader (cf. Jdg 5:6). The Assyrians began to attack the Arabs in 732 B.C., and the Babylonians did the same under Nebuchadnezzar (see Jer 25:17, 23–24). (CSB)

Instead of the clear, open trade routes they normally traveled, they will seek to hide in any cover. (TLSB)

Thick undergrowth, or *mesquite*, of the wilderness, as in our own Southwest, (Kretzamann)

**21:14** *the thirsty bring water* – This is mockery. (Luther)

*fugitive*. Presumably refugees from the conflict of Assyria and Babylon, which was eventually quelled, first by Sargon II and later by Sennacherib. St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “I welcome the fellow-citizens of the saints and servants of God. How gladly, according to the prophet’s command, do I assist with my bread those that flee” (*SLSB*, p 167). (TLSB)

*Tema*. An oasis in northern Arabia about 400 miles southwest of Babylon (cf. Job 6:19; Jer 25:23). (CSB)

They were neighbors of Kedar. He says: “Come to the aid of those who are fleeing from the sword already unsheathed and bare, those who formerly were powerful but are now beggars and exiles, those who are being repaid for what they did to others. The Lord, who never deceives, has said this: ‘Glory, wealth, power, people, etc.,’ that is, these Arabians are famous in the valor of war and they prevail with arrows and brave men. But the Lord wishes to destroy and enfeeble them. It is the Lord who does not lie. This is most certain.” (Luther)

*meet the fugitive with bread* – Thus anticipating the wants of those who were in need and giving them the food which they needed for their support now that they were fugitives before the enemy. (Kretzmann)

**21:15** *sword ... bow.* The simple bows of the Arabs were ineffective against the swords and composite bows of Assyria. (CSB)

**21:16** *within a year* – The Lord will make short work of Kedar. (TLSB)

*hired worker.* May refer to mercenary service. (TLSB)

*Kedar.* The home of Bedouin tribes in the Arabian Desert. Kedar was known for its flocks (60:7; Eze 27:21). Nebuchadnezzar defeated the people of Kedar (Jer 49:28–29; cf. Jer 2:10). (CSB)

Tribe living in Arabia (perhaps standing for all the tribes of Arabia). They were paying tribute to Assyria at least in 738 BC. The forces of Kedar amounted to nothing. All of this is sure because the Lord has spoken (40:8; 55:10–11). (TLSB)

**Ch 21** The Lord appoints Isaiah to serve as a watchman and announce God’s mighty acts, in particular the fall of Babylon. Although every Christian serves as a watchman, God specially calls pastors to serve publicly as His watchmen, proclaiming both God’s threats and promises. In every matter to which the Lord has spoken, the outcome is certain because the results are His doing. For this reason, we can confidently rejoice in the salvation Jesus has won for us and in the promises of forgiveness and everlasting life announced by His watchmen. • Dear Lord, as You appointed Isaiah to serve as a watchman, be with our pastor(s). Grant them eloquence and strength to speak Your truth, even in times of anguish. In Jesus’ name. Amen. (TLSB)