

# ***Isaiah Part 28: Babylon and the one true God***

## **Isaiah 46 and 47**

### ***The idols of Babylon and the one true God (Isaiah 46 v 1 to 13)***

These chapters are about Babylon, Isaiah 46 showing the powerlessness of Babylon's gods and the folly of worshipping them, and rebuking those Jews who do not receive God's revelation of his purposes...

“Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts” (v 1) – Bel and Nebo were names of two false gods the idol-worshipping nations such as Babylon served. It is as if now God gets personal, ‘naming names’ when it comes to idols; and now these false gods are brought low. The names of the pagan gods Bel and Nebo are familiar to us in the names ‘Belshazzar’ and ‘Nebuchadnezzar’. The picture here seems to be of the inhabitants of Babylon – perhaps fleeing from the future Persian conquerors – carrying their chief idols on beasts of burden.

- In verses 1 to 4, consider the difference between the gods of Babylon that have to be borne by beasts and carried away by their worshippers, and the God of Israel who bears his people throughout their history. Is your faith one that is a burden to you, or do you know and trust the one who will bear you even to old age?

“Who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb” (v 3) – the false gods represented by dumb idols must be carried; but God carries his people. He carried them from before their birth, and he promises to continue to carry them into old age (v 4). This is the same fatherly care Jesus spoke of in Luke 12 v 6, 7. “Those who lavish gold from the purse” (v 6) – much money and attention is given to the production and care of these idols. But though one cries out to it, it cannot answer nor save the idol-worshipper out of his trouble. Isaiah again exposes the folly of idolatry.

“Remember this and stand firm” (v 8) – we gain courage when we remember the things God tells us to remember. How much defeat we suffer in the Christian life through simply forgetting! “Remember the former things of old; for I am God... declaring the end from the beginning” (v 9, 10) – God knows the end of every matter, every course of circumstances, just as clearly as anyone else can see the beginning of it. “Saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (v 10) – God knows the end from the beginning because he is much more than a passive observer of events. His counsel shall stand; his works and plans never fail, because he will accomplish his purpose. God's people must remember this – and we too can have tremendous courage when we understand and remember who God is, and what he can do.

“Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country” (v 11) – this is another reference to Cyrus. God's people need to remember that God always has a deliverer for his people, even if he has to find one among pagan kings! “My salvation will not delay” (v 13) – God's people need to remember that God's timing is always precise and wise. When we are stubborn-hearted we need to listen to God and remember that he is never late. God knows exactly when to bring deliverance.

### ***The humiliation of Babylon (Isaiah 47 v 1 to 15)***

“Come down and sit in the dust” (v 1) – Isaiah pictures Babylon as a proud queen (“sit on the ground without a throne”, v 1), humbled to the status of a lowly slave with none to help her. She is stripped of her fine clothing, and forced to march into exile (“pass through the rivers”, v 2). “I will take vengeance, and I will spare no one” (v 3) – the humiliation God will impose upon Babylon is exactly the humiliation that Babylon would inflict upon Judah and Jerusalem. When God humbles Babylon, he is simply taking vengeance.

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“Our Redeemer” (v 4) – this translates the Hebrew word גֹּאֵל (*go-el*), ‘kinsman-redeemer’: (i) a kinsman-redeemer had to be a close relative: Jesus fits this specification, for according to his humanity he is a Jew: (ii) a kinsman-redeemer had to be able to perform his duties: Jesus does not lack this ability; (iii) sometimes a kinsman-redeemer had to be an avenger of blood: Christ will work vengeance upon Babylon for her oppression of God’s people (see Revelation 17, 18); (iv) frequently a kinsman-redeemer had to pay a ransom to free a prisoner: Jesus shed his blood upon the Cross to ransom mankind from sin and judgment.

Why will God humble Babylon? “I was angry with my people” (v 6) – Babylon thought that she had conquered Judah and Jerusalem through her own power. But Babylon did not understand that she really conquered them because God was angry with his people, and used Babylon as an instrument of his judgment. “You said, ‘I shall be mistress forever’” (v 7) – Babylon was blind, Babylon was cruel, and now Babylon is shown to be proud and presumptuous. For all these reasons, God promises to humble Babylon.

- What sins brought about Babylon’s downfall, and God’s judgment upon her? What did she assume was her security against future disaster (v 8 to 13)?
- What does the Word of God teach us about all forms of fortune-telling, crystal-gazing and the like? What does this chapter tell us about what will happen in the hour of judgment if we have been trusting in anyone or anything other than in God himself?

“Who say in your heart, ‘I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children’” (v 8). See Revelation 18 v 7: “I am no widow” – this is a strange boast! Babylon seems to be deliberately contrasting herself with Israel, who is described as a ‘widow’ (e.g. Lamentations 1 v 1). “Hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely” (v 8) – in the midst of her pride and arrogance God brings another charge against Babylon. Judgment also comes because of her “many sorceries and the great power of [her] enchantments” (v 9). Babylon was famous as a founding place and breeding ground for occult arts and practices.

“You felt secure in your wickedness” (v 10) – this is a searching insight into the hearts of proud sinners. They trust in their continuing wickedness to cover the tracks of their previous sins. They are clever, but their wisdom in wickedness has “led [them] astray”. “Evil shall come upon you” (v 11) – and it did, as the City of Babylon was captured in a single night, when the Babylonians believed all was safe and secure (see Daniel 5). The rebuke of Babylon’s pride is a simple fulfilment of a principle repeated many times in the Bible: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ (Proverbs 3 v 34; James 4 v 6; 1 Peter 5 v 5).

“Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries” (v 12) – God challenges the sorcerers of Babylon to save them from judgment. If they had any real spiritual power, they should be able to, but their weakness in the face of God’s judgment will be exposed. “Behold, they are like stubble; the fire consumes them” (v 14) – not only can the sorcerers of Babylon not deliver others from God’s judgment, they can’t even deliver themselves. The fire of judgment that comes upon them will be severe; it will not be a coal to be warmed by, nor a comfortable fire to sit in front of! How many underestimate the strength of God’s judgment! We see the same tragic thinking among those who say, ‘I won’t mind going to hell. I’ll party there with all my friends!’ They think the fires of judgment will somehow be comforting, but they are making a dreadful mistake. Can there be a more dangerous sin?

“There is no one to save you” (v 15) – what a final indictment! If we will not find our salvation in Jesus; if we will not look to him and be saved, then certainly no one shall save us...

*Prayer – Lord, as we read these solemn chapters, we are reminded of your holiness, and of your hatred and judgment of sin – idolatry, pride and occult practices. Help us never to forget that your righteous judgment is like a fire that consumes those who reject you, and that nothing can deliver them from the power of the flame. Lord, with fear and trembling we remind ourselves that you are our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts, the Holy One of Israel. Jesus, you are our kinsman-redeemer, for you shed your blood upon the Cross to ransom us from sin and judgment. We put our trust in you afresh, and we give you humble thanks. Amen.*