

In the Shadow of the King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 February 2023

Preacher: Hunter Nicholson

[0:00] All right, so let me set the scene. In January of 588 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon, the most powerful nation, one of the most powerful nations that had ever existed, and the most powerful nation that did exist at the time, he arrived at the gates of Judah and Jerusalem with all of his army with the explicit intent of seeing that city brought to its knees.

And he did just that. He set up a siege work around the city, and he waited, and he waited, and he waited until the famine was unbearable in the city and chaos reigned.

And then after 18 months had passed when they could no longer stand it, the king of Judah at the time, Zedekiah, made a last-ditch effort to escape from the city.

And so he and some of his soldiers in the middle of the night board a hole through one of the walls in the city, and they escaped. But eventually they were caught, and Zedekiah, the king of Judah, was brought before Nebuchadnezzar, and his punishment for standing up against Nebuchadnezzar was that he was made to watch all of his sons executed before his eyes, after which Nebuchadnezzar had his eyes put out, and then he was carried in chains to Babylon where he lived the rest of his life.

And the symbolism of that act, it was a symbolic act, would not have been lost on anybody. The last thing the last king of Judah would see was his kingly line ending.

[1:48] That was a symbolic act meant to destroy hope, and it was a message to the rest of the world to say, this is a country, Judah, that has no future.

And shortly thereafter, they confirmed that fact by absolutely destroying the city of Jerusalem. They tore down its walls brick by brick. They burned the city to the ground. They tore down the temple of Yahweh, the living God.

They carried away the city's wealth, and any Hebrew who had any political or religious value that had not already been executed was carried in chains into Babylon for exile for the rest of their lives.

And so what you have left of Jerusalem, the great city of David, is a heap of ashes, and the only people that were left were the poor who are now, were now as poor as they had ever been and completely leaderless.

And so if it's not already apparent, that was probably the lowest point in the life of God's people in all of the Old Testament, and when hope was completely lost, completely gone.

[2:57] And the natural question that anyone would have asked, and people did ask in that moment, was how could this have happened to God's chosen people?

And that's where our passage, Isaiah chapter three and Isaiah chapter four come in, because Isaiah was writing more than 100 years before that day.

But somehow in some way, he saw that day coming, and he saw the downward spiral that was leading to that one day, and he provides an answer to that question, how could this happen to us?

And so what we're going to look at tonight is Isaiah's answer to the question, how did Jerusalem fall? So we're going to look at the question, he answers two questions. One, why the fall?

And it's an answer that is, there's basically no good news, that it's painful and it's necessary to hear. But Isaiah doesn't stop there, because in chapter four he makes the claim that in the circumstances would have actually been the hardest claim to accept, which was the fall was not final, that this was not the end of the story for Judah.

[4:06] So that's what we're going to look at tonight, these two points. Why the fall and why the fall is not final? So first, why the fall? And the answer that Isaiah gives is really simple.

He says, Judah and Jerusalem had rejected God as their righteous king. And you know, let's be honest, this is a prophet of Yahweh, that's not the most surprising thing that you could imagine a prophet might say.

But the reason that it needed to be said, and the reason that it needed to be said so explicitly, was because there were a lot of other reasons that you could imagine why Judah fell that you would have put before this.

Namely, the greatest army in the world who is evil is standing at your gates and just tore down your walls. That's a good answer to the question, why did Judah fall?

And there's other reasons like the kings of Judah were generally getting worse and worse as leaders. There was political turmoil inside the city. The rich were oppressing the poor, all these things.

[5:05] And Isaiah never says that those are irrelevant to the fall of Judah. But what he says is none of those get to the heart of the issue. The heart of Judah's fall is that they had rejected God as their rightful king.

And what you could, chapter three is a classic example of what prophets do, because we often think about prophets, maybe because we've read a lot of fiction books.

We often think about prophets as that their sole purpose is to predict the future and just to show off how awesome their predictions can be, how accurate they can be.

But that's not what prophets are primarily meant to do. Prophets help us see the world the way that it really is, whether that's the past or the present or the future.

They help us to see the world with God's eyes. And you could say that what the prophets do for us is they give us corrective lenses to see the world the way that it really is.

[6:04] And sometimes that correction is drastic. So Isaiah, he's living over 100 years before the fall of Jerusalem. And he's living at a time when things are not going that bad.

Judah was a nation that was doing well, especially compared to its neighbors. Isaiah, as far as we can tell, he lived through the fall of Judah's sister nation, Israel.

And Israel was always the wicked step-brother. It was always the one that you could point out and say, well, at least we're not Israel. We're Judah. And when Israel fell, they could point to Israel and say, well, they fell because they were unrighteous.

But we're doing okay. We've stayed together because God is with us and we're righteous. And it's to that nation that outwardly seems to be doing so well that God, through Isaiah, says, you have a problem.

And if you don't address it now, this sickness that's inside of you will eventually destroy you. And the heart of that sickness, again, I'll say it again and again, is that Judah had rejected God as her true king.

[7:13] The picture we have in Isaiah chapter 3 is of a people who consciously tried to live completely independently from God.

And so what you see in the way that Isaiah talks about the judgment that's coming on Judah in chapter 3, and what he says about all their sinfulness, you can see that he's trying to do it with a corrective lens.

And he's trying to help them see the world the way that it actually is, but the way that they have ignored the world. And so in verse 1, he opens with this. He says, behold, the Lord, the God of hosts.

He's reminding them to look up and to see that there is more to this world than what they can see with their eyes. There's more to this world than the army that's at the gate.

There's more of an explanation. So he tells them to look up. And when you call God the Lord of hosts, hosts is another word for armies. So he's saying, you've forgotten how powerful this God is and how powerful he is and active in this world.

[8:20] And it's that God who is so powerful that he says in verse 1 and 2, it's this God who's taking away his support from you. There's more to this world than you can see.

And God is active in it. And he's part of the explanation for what's happening to you. And then in verse 8, you get to the heart of Isaiah's indictment against the people.

He says in verse 8, for Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen because, here's the reason, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord defying his glorious presence.

And you may have a footnote in your Bible that says that what it actually says in Hebrew there is not defying his glorious presence, but literally defying the eyes of his glory.

So what you have is this picture of a people whose idea of God is so small that they no longer fear him.

[9:16] And they don't mind sinning to his face because they see him as irrelevant to their lives. It's a picture of a people who no longer feared God, and it's a God for them has no practical relevance whatsoever.

So in verse 9, it says, for the look on their faces bears witness against them. They proclaim their sin like Sodom. They do not hide it. So these are people who sin shamelessly because they don't fear God.

They don't think anything of God. They don't hide it. And then what you see in the rest of chapter 3, and we can't go through every verse, but what you see in the rest of chapter 3 is a laundry list of other sins that show how far Judah has fallen.

And what you, the picture you get is of a city that has fallen into complete anarchy and oppression and lawlessness. So for instance, in verse 14, Isaiah says, excuse me, in verse 11, woe to the wicked, it shall be ill with him.

Verse 12, my people, infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them. Now I know someone's going to ask me about that afterwards. What's so wrong about women ruling over?

[10:27] And what most commentators say is that what this is a reference to is the harem of the king. So what you have is a king who has basically abdicated all of his wisdom and all of his thinking.

And he's, the scriptures call him an infant because he can't think for himself. He's not worthy of being a leader.

And when you bring all these things together, what you have is a society that has fallen apart. The oppressed, the poor are oppressed.

It says that their face are ground into the earth. All consequences of the fact that Judah has rejected God as their king.

So let me stop there and say, why would we care to talk about this? Why talk about all this judgment that happened 3,000 years ago? Is there a lesson here?

[11:29] And I think there's at least one lesson in all this judgment which tells us about the human experience, which is that all of us were made to live independence on God as our king.

We were made to live in conscious dependence on God. Yes, the Bible commands it. Yes, it's right that we live in conscious dependence, but it's the reason that we're made.

And if we don't live in conscious dependence on God, I think what this passage illustrates in vivid, painful imagery is that things will go wrong and it will often go wrong in places that we don't expect it to go wrong.

But when I say that we were made to live in conscious dependence on God, that's actually a really specific claim because if you think about it, that's not true of any other animal in creation, not true of any other creature.

It's not true of the deer. It's not true of the birds. It's not true of plants. God made no other creature in the world to live in conscious dependence on him.

[12:33] They all do depend on him for their lives, but we're the only creature that God made to know him and to love him and to be in a relationship with him.

We know, unlike all the other animals, we know that we are dependent on God, and that's not a curse for us. It's not a punishment that God's given us.

It's actually part of our glory that we're the only creature in all of creation that can look up to the heavens and talk to the Creator and worship Him and thank Him for what He's done and love him and feel that love reciprocated.

No other creature has that. That's a gift. But it's also a necessity so that if we're not living in dependence, things begin to go wrong.

And I can put it like this. If we are not living in conscious dependence on God, things will go wrong as sure as you will die if you do not take in oxygen.

[13:38] And often we think about one of those as far more serious than the other. You really need oxygen because things are going to go bad if you don't. But is that really true? Is oxygen more essential to us than dependence on God?

And you may not realize the symptoms of not depending on God immediately, but the consequences are far more dire than a few minutes without oxygen.

The ironic tragedy of all of this judgment and all of this sin, the ironic tragedy is that the Bible over and over again portrays mankind as having this perpetual tendency to seek independence from God, but in doing so to make ourselves dependent on something else that in the end will totally destroy us.

So we seek not to be dependent. And in doing so, we depend on something else that will in the end destroy us. And that's exactly what you see in Isaiah chapter 3.

Judah doesn't want to be ruled by a divine king. And so what they do is they immediately put their hope, their dependence in other places. And there's two examples, two main examples that you see in chapter 3.

[14:50] In one place, Judah puts its hope in its human leaders. It gives all of its power to its human leaders.

And what happens as an effect is its human leaders crush the people because they don't depend on God. They're not answerable to God.

And so they use the power that they amass for themselves. And what God does in response is he punishes them in accordance with that sin.

So the one thing they want is to be dependent on human leaders. And so the punishment that he gives them is he takes away those leaders. So that's what he means when he says in verses 1, he says, I'm taking away your support and your supply and your water.

And verse 2, and the mighty men and the soldiers and the judge and the prophets. He says, all these things that you have given your truest hope to, all these leaders who you expect to save you.

[15:51] In the end, they have been the ones that have been oppressing you. And because of that, I'm going to take them away from you. And you see that very vividly in the fall of Jerusalem, where all the leaders of the city are taken away into exile.

And then if you look in verses 6 and 7, there's this picture that's almost comical if it weren't true. Where there's this picture where Isaiah says, here's what's going to happen.

A man will take hold of his brother in the house of his father saying, you have a cloak and you shall be our leader. And this heap of ruins shall be under your rule.

Isaiah imagines a day when it will be so hard to find someone fit to lead in the city of Judah that for a man simply to own a cloak is qualifications enough for him to be a ruler.

And then once they actually find that man, that man is not going to want to accept the job because he sees how futile it is. So what you have on one hand is the men of the city are placing all of their hope in leaders who are oppressive.

[16:59] And then he turns to the women of the city, which is a different picture. And he says the women of the city, towards the end of the chapter in chapter 3, he gives this picture of the women of Judah as seeking their independence from God, as manifesting their independence from God by having flashy wealth and by being haughty and by showing their pride.

These are people who are consumed with, they've come to depend on their wealth as the source of their identity. And again, God gives them a punishment commiserate with their sin.

And he says he's going to take away all the wealth, but then the saddest part is in chapter 4 verse 1 where he says, and seven women will take hold of one man in that day saying, we will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes.

Only let us be called by your name, take away our reproach. There's going to be so few men in the city, and these women who have been so independent of God are going to spend the rest of their lives begging to be dependent on any man they can find.

Now the point of this is not to say, here's what men are like in a bad situation, and here's what women are like in a bad situation. What Isaiah is saying is everywhere you look in this city, there's wickedness.

[18:25] Whether you look to the men or you look to the women, wherever you go, people are living as if God is not their king. And it's this tragic proof that we are made to live independence on God, and that when these people seek to be independent through some other means, it eventually destroys them.

And what do I do with this? Well on the one hand, it leaves me with hard questions to myself, because I don't think that these are another species of human beings. I think that they took their sins further than we have probably ever seen people take their sins.

But the sin is the same. There's a longing in all of our hearts to be independent from God, and to that extent, I have to ask myself, where in my life am I seeking to be independent from God as my king?

One way of framing that question is, are there places in my heart, secret sins that I harbor, anger, sin, anger, lust, bitterness towards other people?

Are there things that no one else knows, but places that I don't even want God to see? Because if that's the case, what Isaiah comes to us and says is, behold your God.

[19:52] He's here. He sees all. So it makes me want to search my heart. But it also leaves me hopeless. And I think we should look at this chapter and feel a sense of hopelessness, because this is saying any man, any woman who has sought to be independent from God is worthy of God's judgment.

We need to hear that, and we need to hear the power of that statement. And even if we don't take it as far as the people in Judah took it, we have to see what they did as the end of the road of anyone who wants to truly become independent from God.

So that's a lot of bad news. And in the context, the people of Judah could have just accepted that, and they would have heard that and said, we understand.

We understand that we've gone astray and we don't deserve God's love. And that's why chapter four is so stunning, because in chapter four, Isaiah comes to the people and he says, the fall is not final, which is in the context, the most impossible thing to hear.

These are people who have deserved God's judgment. They've received God's judgment. And then Isaiah comes to them and says, no, the fall is not final because God is not done with you.

[21:18] And the reason that Isaiah gives is a simple one. He says, the reason that the fall is not final is because there's a branch. Simple enough, right?

There's a branch, so you can take hope. And I so badly wish that I could have met Isaiah because if I could ask him one question, I would want to know, what did you think you were talking about when you said we can take hope in a branch?

I believe that Isaiah had hope in Christ, but I don't know how clearly he had that hope. When God told him there was a branch and that was going to be the hope, did he know what that meant?

Did he really know? There's a famous Jewish scholar in the 20th century who wrote a book about the prophets, and he opens his book with this one line that I've never forgotten.

He says, the prophets were some of the most disturbing men who had ever lived. And that seems right, doesn't it? You read these stories, and these men do these strange things, and they have these strange prophecies.

[22:21] And if he came in through the doors, we'd sit him up here and we'd interview him. And we want to hear all about what he knew, what was it like to actually hear the word of God? What were these visions like?

When you saw a branch, what do you mean you saw a branch? Tell me about these things. But I also think that if Isaiah were to come here this day, he would be really frustrated by the questions that we would ask him, because he would look at us and he would say, why are you asking me questions?

You're the one who has actually seen this hope with your own eyes, and you've seen the word of God come and dwell amongst you. How dare you treat me like I'm the one who is more blessed by God than you are?

Take for instance, chapter four, verse two, where he talks about this branch. He says, in that day, the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.

Here's this cryptic language. There's a branch that's going to give us hope. And the idea of a prophetic branch is something that recurs over and over again in the prophets. Coincidentally enough, this is the first time you ever actually see it in the prophets, but it's in Zechariah, it's in Jeremiah, and it's later on in Isaiah.

[23:43] And a lot of times, and this helps us understand what's going on here, a lot of times whenever the prophets talk about this righteous branch, they'll call it the branch of David, or the branch from David.

And when they do that, and we'll see this in a few weeks, what that means is it's ancestry terms like a family tree. And it's this prediction that someone is going to come from the line of David, and that person will be a Messiah.

Which is incredibly hopeful if you think about what's happened in the fall of Jerusalem. The king was carried away in chains, and yet these prophets say that one day there's going to be a king, there's going to be someone from the branch of David.

But that's not what this verse says, it doesn't say the branch of David, what does it say? In that day, the branch of the Lord.

In that day, the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious. Now that tells us first of all, though it must have been hard to believe, that God would rescue his people by raising up a descendant, a branch, somehow from within himself.

[25:00] It's a divine claim about an earthly Messiah. And that's what I want to ask Isaiah, how clearly did you understand what you meant when you said a branch of the Lord?

Because it almost sounds blasphemous, you know, if you're a Jew, what do you mean there's going to be a branch, a descendant of God? What can that possibly mean? And it's not until Jesus steps onto the scene in human history that we have a picture of what that could actually mean.

A man born of a woman, but who's also the son of God. He is from the branch of David, but he's also from the branch of Yahweh, he's divine.

And even so, that idea, someone from the branch of Yahweh was so offensive that they didn't let Jesus live, of course, because he claimed to be God.

And that fact, that fact, what that prophecy does is on the one hand it tells us about the future. If you're from Isaiah's perspective, it tells you that one day there's going to be a branch that will come up from Yahweh and it will be a Messiah, he will be a Messiah.

[26:10] But it also tells us something else that's really important that goes beyond a historic event and it tells us about what it means to be human. It told them about what it meant to be human and it tells us too, because the fact that God had to raise up a branch of Yahweh meant that the salvation that Judah needed in the midst of its hopelessness was not going to come from within itself.

At least it wasn't going to come exclusively from within itself. And isn't that the greatest indictment of the people of Judah? They so badly wanted to be independent from God.

And God comes to them and says, listen, I'm going to save you and the only way that I can do it is not by raising up someone, it's by inserting myself into the human story.

You cannot be saved from within yourselves. God says to Judah, in that day I will save you when you have no hope and it won't be because a great man arose exclusively from among you.

Of course, Jesus was human too, but you're going to need God to save you. And the rest of chapter four emphasizes that point. What happens when the branch of Yahweh comes to Jerusalem?

[27:30] Well, it says, the people left in the city will be called holy. The Lord will wash away the filth of the daughter of Zion and cleanse the bloodstains of Jerusalem. God will come to a people who are not holy and who can never make themselves holy.

And what does he do? He cleans them. So God comes into this city that's filled with wickedness and filth and wretchedness. And he cleans it and he calls the people that are in there holy.

And that hope that Isaiah was looking towards is the same one that we look back on. This idea that Jesus Christ comes into the city of Jerusalem, a place that is representative of all of our wickedness and of all of our sinfulness.

And he cleans the city. He does it himself and he offers his life on the cross to cleanse the sins of all the people who are meant to live and dwell in Jerusalem.

And the final question as I'm working towards an end here is what are we meant to do with a truth like that? What are we meant to do with this idea that God is going to come and cleanse Jerusalem?

[28 : 45] And I only want to offer one answer tonight, which is that we as people who believe in that Messiah are called to live consciously in the shadow of our King and to find our true peace there.

You see in verse six, the final prophecy that he makes about the branch, there will be a booth for shade by day from the heat and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Isaiah prophesied that when Jesus comes, the symbol of his coming will be that he will overshadow all of his people.

In verse five, it says, then the Lord will create over the whole side of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day and smoke and shining of a flame fire by night for over all the glory there will be a canopy.

And you have this picture of a people who so badly wanted to be independent from God. They're brought to their knees. They see that they have no hope. And rather than destroy them, God comes and he covers them and he gives them shade and he gives them a rest from all the things that they have caused and have led them astray.

[30 : 03] And that's what he calls us to do is to sit under the shadow of the King and rest. So what does that look like? It looks like a lot of different things.

One you could say it looks like the opposite of everything that Israel did in chapter three. It looks like not trying to live lives independent from God, where we put our hope in exclusively in our leaders or in our wealth or in our pride.

But it also looks like it also looks like trusting that that relationship is dependent not on what we have done, but on what God has done.

Because the whole point of chapter four is God is going to come to you at your worst and he's going to rescue you and your call is to live in the light of that live in the shadow of it.

And Judah in the end will receive the one thing that it lacked someone that they could depend on someone that can give them shelter and someone that can bring them peace.

[31 : 15] I'll conclude with this idea that the wonder of Isaiah chapter three and Isaiah chapter four is that they go together. That the same people who are worthy of destruction, who have gone so far astray, those are the people that God looks to and says, in that day, you are the people that I'm going to raise up a branch that covers.

You're the people that I'm going to wash away your guilt. I'm going to cleanse you and you are the people that I'm going to give you shade. And the call on us tonight is to live in that shade and to live in conscious, conscious dependence on our King who gives us peace.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father in all the distractions of this life, we pray that you would help us to remember you, that you would help us to look up and behold not only the God of hosts, but the God of grace and the God who shelters us under the shadow of his wings.

In your son's name we pray. Amen.