

## *Session 19*

# Isaiah 21:1-17 | The Watchman's Night: Babylon, Dumah, and Arabia

*Isaiah Oracle by Oracle / Dr. Randy White*

Isaiah 21 contains three burdens joined by an atmosphere of watching, waiting, and approaching judgment. The first oracle does not name Babylon until verse 9, but its storm, eastern armies, interrupted feast, and watchman's report all move toward the cry, "**Babylon is fallen, is fallen.**" The second burden hears a voice from Seir asking how much of the night remains. The third turns to Arabia, where caravans hide, Tema aids fugitives, and Kedar's glory is reduced within one measured year.

These are judgments upon real peoples in Isaiah's world. Babylon repeatedly challenged Assyria, and Elam was deeply involved in those conflicts. Yet Babylon fell more than once, and later Scripture deliberately takes up Isaiah's language. The chapter therefore begins in its eighth-century setting while establishing patterns of judgment that reach beyond one campaign.

### The burden of the desert of the sea (vv.1-2)

- **Verse 1 — Judgment advances against Babylon like a southern whirlwind.** The oracle opens with movement before identifying the city that will fall.
  - **"The burden of the desert of the sea"** is an unusual title, but verse 9 identifies the subject as Babylon. The Babylonian plain was crossed by the Euphrates, canals, marshes, and floodwaters. The title joins its watery setting with the desolation coming upon it.
  - Isaiah sometimes uses evocative prophetic names rather than ordinary place-names. The **"valley of vision"** in Isaiah 22:1 is a nearby example.
  - **"As whirlwinds in the south pass through"** compares the invasion to violent winds sweeping through the Negev. The judgment is sudden, forceful, and impossible to control.
- **"It cometh from the desert, from a terrible land"** pictures the calamity approaching from a threatening region. Geography cannot shelter Babylon when the LORD appoints its overthrow.
- **Verse 2 — Elam and Media are summoned against the treacherous spoiler.** The vision is grievous because both imperial cruelty and its violent end are in view.
  - **"The treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth"** portrays settled conduct. The

power that betrayed and plundered others would itself be brought down.

- **“Go up, O Elam: besiege, O Media”** summons peoples east of Mesopotamia. Elam was active in Babylonian-Assyrian conflict during Isaiah’s lifetime; the Medes later became prominent in the overthrow of Assyria and the eastern power that conquered Babylon.
- The historical details should not be forced into a single campaign. The names fit the

eastern world from which judgment came, while the prophecy’s central emphasis is the certainty of Babylon’s fall.

- **“All the sighing thereof have I made to cease”** gives the LORD’s purpose. The empire’s overthrow ends the groaning it imposed upon others (compare Habakkuk 2:8).
- Isaiah 13:17 and Jeremiah 51:11 similarly associate the Medes with judgment upon Babylon.

## The prophet’s anguish and the watchman’s report (vv.3-10)

- **Verses 3-4 — Isaiah feels the terror of the vision in his own body.** Certainty about divine judgment does not make him indifferent to its human cost.
- **“Pangs have taken hold upon me, as the pangs of a woman that travaileth”** describes unavoidable and intensifying pain. Isaiah is not merely solving a prophetic puzzle.
- **“I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it”** joins what the prophet hears and sees. Revelation overwhelms him emotionally and physically.
- **“The night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me”** changes expected rest into dread. It also prepares for the banquet in verse 5, though Isaiah does not explicitly identify that feast with a particular named king.
- Daniel 5:1-6 supplies a later and striking parallel: Babylon feasts while its fall approaches. The parallel need not mean that Isaiah 21 refers exclusively to Belshazzar’s night.
- **Verse 5 — A feast is interrupted by the command to prepare for battle.** Pleasure and danger stand side by side.
- **“Prepare the table, watch in the**

**watchtower, eat, drink”** presents leaders occupied with banquet and security arrangements.

- The wording translated **“watch in the watchtower”** is difficult, and some understand it as arranging rugs or seating. In either case the scene turns abruptly from preparation and pleasure to war.
- **“Arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield”** sounds the alarm. Oil was used to prepare and preserve leather shields; the command concerns readiness for combat rather than a sacred ceremony.
- The problem is not the meal itself but confidence and ease while the announced judgment is already near.
- **Verses 6-8 — The Lord appoints a watchman to report exactly what he sees.** Long vigilance precedes the decisive announcement.
- **“Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth”** defines the watchman’s commission. His duty is faithful observation and report, not invention or speculation.
- The **“chariot with a couple of horsemen,”** together with asses and camels, describes mounted forces or a military convoy. The exact arrangement is uncertain, but the approaching signal is

clear.

- **“He hearkened diligently with much heed”** stresses careful, sustained attention.
- The KJV’s difficult **“He cried, A lion”** may describe a cry like a lion or a lion-like figure. The direct address that follows favors hearing it as the watchman’s forceful cry.
- **“I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights”** shows perseverance through delay. **Ward** is his assigned place or duty of watch.
- **Verse 9 — The watch ends with the announcement of Babylon’s fall.** The approaching riders carry the interpretation of the vision.
- **“Babylon is fallen, is fallen”** is emphatic. The repetition intensifies the certainty and completeness of the collapse.
- Babylon experienced several historical defeats. Sargon II removed Merodach-baladan in 710 BC; Sennacherib defeated him again in 703 and devastated Babylon in 689; Cyrus took the city in 539. The oracle fits a world of repeated Babylonian rebellion and judgment without requiring every detail to describe only one event.
- **“All the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground”** gives the full its theological meaning. Babylon’s gods cannot preserve either their images or their city.
- Jeremiah 50:2 likewise joins Babylon’s fall with the humiliation of its idols.
- Revelation 14:8 and 18:2 deliberately reuse **“Babylon is fallen, is fallen.”** The later application does not erase historical Babylon; it carries its pattern of rebellion and overthrow toward final judgment.
- **Verse 10 — God’s threshed people receive the report Isaiah heard from the LORD.** The empire will not have the last word.
- **“O my threshing, and the corn of my floor”** addresses a people subjected to crushing pressure. **Corn** in KJV usage means grain generally.
- Threshing is severe, but its purpose is to separate and preserve the grain. The image does not say that the grain is worthless.
- **“That which I have heard of the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have I declared unto you”** grounds the message in revelation rather than political guesswork.
- **“The LORD of hosts”** rules the forces feared by Babylon, while **“the God of Israel”** assures His covenant people that the nations remain under His authority.

## The burden of Dumah: morning and night (vv.11-12)

- **Verse 11 — A voice from Seir asks how much of the night remains.** The chapter’s watchman theme becomes a brief, urgent exchange.
- **“The burden of Dumah”** may refer to the Arabian oasis of Dumah, commonly associated with Dumat al-Jandal. The next line, however, places the caller in Seir, the territory of Edom (Genesis 36:8).
- *Dumah* also resembles the Hebrew word for silence, and the title may contain deliberate wordplay. The safest reading recognizes a real name, the Edomite-Arabian setting, and the atmosphere of night and silence.
- **“Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?”** asks how far the night has advanced or how much remains. Repetition expresses fear,

impatience, and longing for dawn.

- The question is more than curiosity about a date. Night is the lived condition of uncertainty and danger.
- **Verse 12 — Morning comes, but night also comes.** The answer promises change without offering easy optimism.
- **“The morning cometh”** assures the caller that the present darkness is not permanent.
- **“And also the night”** warns that historical relief can be followed by another crisis. A temporary morning is not necessarily the final dawn of Messiah’s

kingdom.

- **“If ye will enquire, enquire ye”** leaves room for continued, serious inquiry. The answer does not provide a timetable.
- **“Return, come”** invites the questioners to turn and approach again. The immediate sense is renewed inquiry, while Isaiah’s larger message gives the call the moral sound of repentance.
- Psalm 130:5-6 similarly compares waiting for the LORD with watchmen waiting for the morning.

## The burden upon Arabia: fugitives and Kedar’s end (vv.13-17)

- **Verse 13 — Dedanite caravans are driven from the road into hiding.** War disrupts commerce and turns travellers into refugees.
- **“The burden upon Arabia”** names the region broadly; the following verses identify Dedan, Tema, and Kedar.
- **“In the forest in Arabia shall ye lodge”** refers to thicket or wooded cover. Travellers who normally relied upon roads, wells, and settled stops must hide away from them.
- **“O ye travelling companies of Dedanim”** addresses the caravans of Dedan, a people associated with north Arabian trade. The plural KJV form **Dedanim** means the people of Dedan.
- The burden is economic and social as well as military: the ordinary movement of goods and people breaks down under invasion.
- **Verses 14-15 — Tema meets the fugitives with water and bread.** The cause of their flight is the violence of war.
- Tema was an important north Arabian oasis. Its inhabitants could give life-saving aid to people driven into the desert.
- **“They prevented with their bread him that fled”** uses **prevented** in its older sense of going before or meeting in advance.

Tema brings food; it does not hinder the fugitives from receiving it.

- The drawn sword and bent bow show that this is actual armed pursuit, not merely a decline in trade.
- **“The grievousness of war”** gathers the whole human burden: violence, displacement, scarcity, disrupted travel, and fear.
- The command to aid the fleeing shows that judgment does not cancel the obligation to show mercy to people in immediate need.
- **Verses 16-17 — Kedar’s glory is diminished within one exactly measured year.** Military reputation cannot preserve the tribe.
- **“Within a year, according to the years of an hireling”** describes a contractual year counted precisely, as in Isaiah 16:14. The judgment is appointed rather than indefinite.
- Kedar, descended from Ishmael (Genesis 25:13), was known for tents, flocks, trade, and warriors. Its human glory was substantial but not beyond the LORD’s government.
- **“The residue of the number of archers”**

indicates survivors while emphasizing their severe reduction. **Residue** means the remainder.

- **“For the LORD God of Israel hath spoken it”** is the decisive conclusion. Israel’s covenant God also rules Babylon, Edom, and Arabia.
- Kedar’s near judgment does not cancel its

future place in prophecy. Isaiah 42:11 calls Kedar to praise the LORD, and Isaiah 60:7 places its flocks in the future glory of Zion.

- The names are ancient peoples and places; they should not be turned carelessly into judgments upon modern ethnic or political groups.

## Teaching Summary

- Isaiah 21 joins three burdens through the themes of night, watchfulness, approaching judgment, and the failure of national glory.
- The **desert of the sea** is Babylon, the Mesopotamian power whose fall ends the sighing caused by its treachery and plunder.
- Isaiah’s anguish shows that faithful proclamation of judgment can be joined with grief over its human cost.
- The interrupted feast exposes false security, while the watchman models patient attention to the word given by God.
- **“Babylon is fallen, is fallen”** speaks within real history and becomes a pattern that later Scripture carries toward final judgment.
- Dumah’s answer is deliberately sober: morning comes, but night also comes. Temporary relief must not be confused with the final kingdom.
- Arabia’s disrupted caravans, Tema’s aid to fugitives, and Kedar’s measured reduction show God’s authority over commerce, warfare, and the nations beyond Israel.
- The chapter ends with its controlling certainty: **“the LORD God of Israel hath spoken it.”**