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Wail, You Ships of Tarshish; Your Fortress is Destroyed 23: 1-14

Wail, you ships of Tarshish, your fortress is destroyed **DIG**: Tyre was the main city of Phoenicia, a prosperous trading country on the Mediterranean Sea. What role did Tyre play in the economy of the surrounding nations? What was the city like before the events of this prophecy? The ships of Tarshish were capable of sailing to the ends of the known world. What message was given to their sailors as they were returning home? Who does Isaiah credit with planning the downfall of Tyre, the kingmaker? How is God's control over the kings and nations evident here? How much of Tyre is left today? Why is that?

REFLECT: If Babylon represented the height of the world's culture, and Tyre an apex of its wealth, how would you use Isaiah's message to challenge people dedicated to power and money? Does this mean power and wealth in themselves are wrong? Why or why not? How does this message serve as an ongoing warning to believers in every age? To your Messianic synagogue, or church, in particular? To you in particular?

With this pronouncement **Isaiah** concludes his judgments upon the nations surrounding Judah. It is a fitting conclusion. As **Babylon**, the great city in the east, opened the section, so **Tyre**, the great city in the west, closes it. This whole section is written in Hebrew poetry.

The near historical prophecy against Tyre took place in several stages over 370 years (to see link click [Eq - The Timeline for Tyre](#)). In the first stage, though Sargon II (721 to 705 BC) and Sennacherib (704 to 681 BC) fought against **Judah** over a period of fourteen years, they did not capture **Judah**; but Sennacherib defeated 46 of **her** fortified cities and laid siege to **Jerusalem** before being turned away by an **Angel of ADONAI** (see [Gw - Then An Angel of ADONAI Put To Death a Hundred and Eighty Five Thousand Men in the Assyrian Camp](#)). In the second stage, Nebuchadnezzar captured and destroyed **Tyre** after thirteen years, although **ADONAI** would eventually restore **her** 70 years later. In the third and last stage, the final destruction of **Tyre** would be left to the Son of Thunder, Alexander

III of Macedon (Alexander the Great).

Alexander the Great accomplished the destruction of **Tyre** in 332 BC. During his campaign in Canaan he requested supplies from **Tyre**. When they refused to assist him, his army took the rubble that was left from the ancient city of **Tyre**, threw it into the sea to build a half-mile causeway, marched out to the island fortress, and defeated the city with the assistance of the navies of surrounding nations. The inhabitants paid dearly for trying Alexander's patience. It is said that he crucified two thousand of the leaders and sold thirty thousand into slavery. Alexander did in seven months what the **Assyrian** king Shalmaneser IV could not do in five years, or the **Babylonian** king Nebuchadnezzar did in thirteen years. Because it was time for **God's** judgment, the city came crashing down. Nothing is left today.

We can learn a great deal from other prophets who prophesied against **Tyre**. **Amos 1:9-10** tells us that **Tyre** had **sold whole communities of Jewish captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood**. During the reigns of David and Solomon, **Tyre** exercised a great influence on the commercial, political, and even religious life of **Isra'el**. Hiram, king of **Tyre**, was a devoted friend of David (**Second Samuel 5:11**), who helped Solomon and him in their building of the Temple (**First Kings 5:1-12; First Chronicles 14:1; Second Chronicles 2:3 and 11**). But in later years, **they** drifted apart. Unmindful of the history of friendly relations between **herself** and **Isra'el**, **she** had sold **Jews** as slaves to **the Greeks** and **Edomites** (**Joel 3:4-8; Amos 1:9-10**). In addition, no king of **Isra'el** or **Judah** had ever made war upon **Tyre**. Arrogant people do not think of others; they merely make decisions based on what is best for themselves, and **Tyre** was arrogant and ungrateful.

Zechariah 9:3 tells us that **Tyre** had **built herself a stronghold; she has heaped up silver like dust, and gold like the dirt of the streets**. **The Phoenicians** loved money. And the more money **they** made, the more money **they** wanted. To those who love money, things become more important than people. **They** become self-centered and egotistical. The love of money can really destroy us.

Ezeki'el 26:1 to 28:19 treats **Tyre** more fully than did any other prophet, and the space given to the prophecies against **Tyre** indicate the importance of the subject from **God's** viewpoint (see the commentary on [Jeremiah G1 - The Sin and Judgment of Tyre and Tzidon](#)). There are two important aspects from **Ezeki'el's** prophecy that help us to understand **God's** judgment against **Tyre**. First, was the fact that **she** rejoiced over the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC when **she** fell to **the Babylonians**. **Tyre** looked at **Judah's** calamity as a chance to become even wealthier. **Judah's** ruin would mean free passage of **Tyre's**

caravans and greater opportunity in trade. Taxes were doubtless levied by **the Jews** on caravans and when **Judah** was strong and had subjugated **Edom**, **she** controlled the caravan routes to the Red Sea, thus hindering **the Phoenician** traders from gaining all the profit **they** hoped for. So first and foremost, **Tyre** was motivated by commercial greed. But **her** sin was that **she** rejoiced at the calamity of **God's people**.

Secondly, the other sin of **Tyre** was **their pride**. Every business, state or nation rots from the head down. In this case, the sin of **Tyre** was modeled by the sin of **their** king. In short, the king of **Tyre** had an ego problem. According to **Phoenician** history, which is confirmed by Josephus, the king at this time was Ithobal II. Riches and power so fed his **pride** that he claimed that he was a god and assumed he was invincible. When he claimed to be a god, he was displaying the same spirit as the one who promised Adam and Eve that they could be as **God (Genesis 3:5; Isaiah 14:13-14; Second Thessalonians 2:4)**. Kings of **Tyre** believed they were descended from the gods, but here was an added emphasis of this king's intolerable **pride** and self-sufficiency. The seat of **God** referred to was **Tyre** itself that the king considered a divine dwelling place. One suggestion says it was an empty throne in the temple of the god Melkarth at **Tyre**, which the king thought to have claimed. According to the writer Sanchuniathon, **Tyre** was called the "Holy Island."⁷⁹

This is an example of **double reference**, which refers to one person or event, in this case **Satan (14:12-15)**, followed by a second person, here Ithobal II, king of **Tyre (Ezeki'el 28:1-19)**, blended together in such a way that they form a complete picture. In other words, **Ezeki'el** was not saying that the king of **Tyre** was **Satan** or that **Satan** was the king of **Tyre**. What **he** was saying was that **he** saw the work and activity of **Satan** being emulated in so many ways by the king of **Tyre**. When **Jesus** rebuked **Peter** in **Matthew 16:21-23**, **He** did not mean that somehow **Peter** had become **Satan himself**. **He** was indicating that the motivation behind **Peter's** opposition to **His** going to the cross was from **Satan**. This appears to be a similar situation.



An oracle concerning Tyre. Wail, O ships of Tarshish (First Kings 10:22, 22:48; Psalm 48:7; Isaiah 2:16; 60:9; Ezekiel 27:25; Jonah 1:3)! For Tyre is destroyed and left without house or harbor. From the land of Cyprus word has come to them (23:1). Tarshish was the city that was originally colonized by the Phoenicians. The ships of Tarshish learn of Tyre's destruction while their ships are anchored at Cyprus. There was actually more than one **Tarshish**; one was on the African coast, south along the route of the Red Sea. A second **Tarshish** was on the southern coast of Spain. A third **Tarshish** was all the way up on the British coast. And now there is new evidence that there was a fourth **Tarshish** on the North African coast. It is believed that **Tarshish** was originally Carthage. It seems that when **Tarshish** established these colonies, **they** gave them all the same name (like McDonalds) because it was **Phoenicia's** private colony.

Mourn, you people of the island and you merchants of Sidon, whom the seafarers have enriched (23:2). Sidon was one of the oldest and most important Phoenician city. The Phoenicians greatly benefited by the goods they received in international trade, and in turn, Phoenician trade enriched those other countries, like the island of Cyprus. On the great waters came the grain of the Shihor, a branch of the Nile River (Joshua 13:3; First Chronicles 13:5; Jeremiah 2:18); for the harvest of the Nile was the revenue of Tyre and she became the marketplace of the nations, an exciting and cosmopolitan city (23:3). Grain from Egypt was one of the most important products transported through the Phoenician trading centers of Tyre and Sidon.

Except the wealth of **Tyre and Sidon** did not come from **their** own efforts. It came by trading with the nations around the Mediterranean **Sea. Be ashamed, O Sidon, and you, O fortress of the sea, for the sea has spoken, "I have neither been in labor nor given**

birth; I have neither reared sons or brought up daughters” (23:4). Therefore, **the sea**, personified, could say that **Tyre** had not gone through the **birth** experience. **She** had brought forth quick wealth without going through the pain. But the downfall of **Tyre** was not only bad news for **Phoenicia**, it was also bad news for the places where **she** traded, like **Egypt**.

When word comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish at the report from Tyre (23:5). For all of **her** history **Egypt** had a commercial alliance with **Phoenician** cities. The bulk of this trade was by sea. As soon as **Tyre** fell, all sea connections north of **her** would be cut off and **Egypt’s** commerce would dry up. The fall of **Tyre** is not only a loss for **Egypt**, but it was also **Egypt’s** pain because **Tyre** was the key city blocking an invasion from the north against **Egypt**. Once **Tyre** fell, it meant that **the Assyrians** would be coming after **Egypt** next.

Word spread around the Mediterranean, with the lament being carried as far as **Tarshish** itself. Then came the evacuation of refugees. **Cross over to Tarshish; wail, you people of the island (23:6).** In a stunning reversal of fortunes, **they** traveled in **their** loss, like **they** once traveled to make a profit. The citizens of **Tyre** that had established many colonies were then seeking refuge in **Tarshish**. A part of the lament was the question, “Could this have actually happened to **Tyre**?” That **city of revelry**, always on the move, had ceased to exist.

Is this your city of revelry, the old, old city, whose feet have taken her to settle in far off places (23:7)? Then we see a taunt against **Tyre**. Today we call **Isaiah’s** day ancient history. Yet, from **Isaiah’s** point of view **Tyre**, which was already 240 years **old** at the time of **his** prophecy, was already ancient history even though it would not be destroyed until much later. **Tyre** was strong enough to withstand Alexander the Great for seven years. So from **Isaiah’s** standpoint **Tyre** would not ultimately be destroyed for another 365 years!

*It is difficult to accept change. We hold on to the old and the familiar. But no matter how much we try, we are in the midst of endless change. Only **God** endures. Everything that is not of **God** is wood, hay, and straw (**First Cor 3:10-15**) and will be burned up on the Day of Judgment. We need to keep a very light touch on the things of this world.*

Tyre’s reversal of fortune is not accidental. It had been ordained and devised by God. **His** purposes are being worked out in human affairs. The question could be asked: **Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth (23:8)?** **Tyre’s** destruction was not in order that Isra’el might dominate, as the pagan view might suggest (**36:13-20**). More accurately, **God’s** purpose is to show the foolishness of human **pride** (**2:11** and **37:26**). Another question comes to mind, “Why did **He** plan it?” **ADONAI** answers through **His**

prophet: **To bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth (23:9b).** God is not opposed to **people** being lifted up. **God** lifted up Moses and David. What **He** opposes is that **pride** which seeks to not rely on **God**, but to rely on self. So, **the LORD** opposes it at every turn, because **pride** prevents men and women from having a relationship with **Him**.

Throughout the entire Mediterranean region - from **Tarshish** in the northwest to the **Nile** River in the southeast, and to **Cyprus** in the northeast - **people** would mourn and weep for the destruction of **Tyre**. **Till your land along the Nile, O Daughter of Tarshish, for you no longer have a harbor (23:10).**

It is at **God's** command that **Tyre** falls. **He has stretched out His hand over the sea and made its kingdoms tremble (23:11a).** The sea, which seemed to be **the Phoenicians'** domain, in fact belongs to **Ha'Shem**. **He** controls the nations around it. **He has given an order concerning Phoenicia that her fortresses be destroyed (23:11b).** Because of this, **Isaiah** was able to declare that **God** would restore **His people** from the apparent hopelessness of exile. It is **He** who orders the universe, not **the Gentile nations (11:10-12, 48:14-16).**

ADONAI said: **No more of your reveling, O Virgin Daughter of Sidon, now crushed (23:12).** There would be no escape for **the Phoenicians**. Although the realization of these things was to be hundreds of years in the future, they seemed already completed in **Isaiah's** mind. When **the prophet** looked at **Tyre**, **he** didn't see a rich, exciting young woman to be envied by those countries around **her**. Instead, **he** saw a used-up old lady picking over **her** ruins. This is the long perspective that believers need to have as we look at this world of ours. As a result of **Tyre's** fall, **her** colonies now became independent. To **the Phoenicians** it seemed like **they** "owned the sea" because of all their financial success. But in fact, it belonged to **God**. In addition, **He**, not **they**, controlled the nations surrounding **their** island fortress. **Tyre** ultimately fell because of the unshakable purpose of **God**. As a result, **Sidon** was also affected because of it.⁸⁰

Look at the land of the Babylonians, this people that is now of no account! The Assyrians have made it a place for desert creatures; they raised up their siege towers, they stripped its fortresses bare and turned it into a ruin (23:13). Keep in mind that **Babylon** was an empire twice. The first **Babylonian** Empire was in the days of Abraham, or shortly thereafter, and **the Assyrians** destroyed it. Then **the Assyrians** became an empire, but **the Babylonians** again rose to power and destroyed **the Assyrians**. One hundred and fifteen years later, which meant that **Tyre** would then be vulnerable to

attack by **the Babylonians**. So that was the second **Babylonian** Empire. **The LORD** would restore **Tyre** after seventy years, but **their** final destruction would be left to Alexander the Great.

Wail, you ships of Tarshish; your fortress is destroyed (23:14). The oracle concerning Tyre ends on the same note that it began (**23:1a**). **Zechariah** tells us: **But the LORD will take away her possessions and destroy her power on the sea, and she will be consumed with fire (Zech 9:4)**. All **her** wealth had been thrown into **the sea**. The implication of all this is clear. Since **ADONAI** had completed all of this, why should **Judah** seek refuge in **Tyre**? It would not make any sense! **The LORD** is the only refuge. **He** rules the nations; **He** is our only Hope. **You who live in the shelter of Elyon, the Most High, who spend your nights in the shadow of Shaddai, the Almighty, who say to ADONAI, "My refuge! My fortress! My God, in whom I trust" - He will rescue you from the trap of the hunter and from the plague of calamities; He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge; His truth is a shield and protection (Ps 91:1-2)**.

Today there is nothing of any significance on the ancient site of **Tyre**. The American archaeologist Edward Robinson found forty or fifty marble columns beneath the water along the shores of **Tyre**. There is no mention of **Tyre** as a nation in the Millennial Kingdom. Believing in the **God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob** could save individual **Phoenicians**, but **the nation** could not be saved. Salvation is personal, not corporate (**Ezeki'el 18:1-29**). Every individual person living in **Tyre** could not be condemned any more than every individual **Israelite** could be saved.

Through **Ezeki'el**, **ADONAI** is saying that **pride** is a destroying sin. It destroyed the glories given to **Lucifer** when **he** was yet **anointed as a guardian cherub (Ezeki'el 28:14)**. Did it not also destroy Ithobal II and **Tyre**? Is there not a warning here for us also?