

June 5 Lesson 1 (NIV)

GOD FORETELLS DESTRUCTION

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 47:10–15

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 47

ISAIAH 47:10–15

- ¹⁰ “You have trusted in your wickedness
and have said, ‘No one sees me.’
Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you
when you say to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.’
- ¹¹ Disaster will come upon you,
and you will not know how to conjure it away.
A calamity will fall upon you
that you cannot ward off with a ransom;
a catastrophe you cannot foresee
will suddenly come upon you.
- ¹² “Keep on, then, with your magic spells
and with your many sorceries,
which you have labored at since childhood.
Perhaps you will succeed,
perhaps you will cause terror.
- ¹³ All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!
Let your astrologers come forward,
those stargazers who make predictions month by month,
let them save you from what is coming upon you.
- ¹⁴ Surely they are like stubble;
the fire will burn them up.
They cannot even save themselves
from the power of the flame.
These are not coals for warmth;
this is not a fire to sit by.
- ¹⁵ That is all they are to you—
these you have dealt with
and labored with since childhood.
All of them go on in their error;

there is not one that can save you.

KEY VERSE

That is all they are to you—these you have dealt with and labored with since childhood. All of them go on in their error; there is not one that can save you.—Isaiah 47:15

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 1: God Delivers and Restores

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. How to Get Away with Murder?
- B. Lesson Context: Isaiah and His Times
- C. Lesson Context: Isaiah and the Future
- I. Failed Confidence (Isaiah 47:10–11)
 - A. God Complex (v. 10)
The Limits of Power
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- II. Failed Defenses (Isaiah 47:12–15)
 - A. Futile Future-Telling (vv. 12–13)
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- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AhazAy-haz.

AssyriansUh-sear-e-unz.

BabyloniansBab-ih-low-nee-unz.

CnutKeh-nyoot.

EzekielEe-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.

Hezekiah *Hez-ih-kye-uh*.

Isaiah *Eye-zay-uh*.

Jeroboam *Jair-uh-boe-um*.

Jotham *Jo-thum*.

Judah *Joo-duh*.

Nebuchadnezzar *Neb-yuh-kud-**nez**-er*.

Sennacherib *Sen-**nack**-er-ib*.

Sweyn *Svehn*.

Uzziah *Uh-zye-uh*.

Zedekiah *Zed-uh-kye-uh*.

Introduction

A. How to Get Away with Murder?

Michelle Martinko was a miracle child. She was born 12 years and five miscarriages after her older sister, when their mother was 44 years old. Friends described her as a kind, smart person. When she was found murdered in her car on December 20, 1979, her family was devastated and the city was stunned.

The killer had come prepared. There were no fingerprints or other usable evidence found; DNA testing was not yet available. The case went cold for years. Michelle's parents died without ever seeing her killer brought to justice.

When DNA testing finally became available, a full profile of the murderer was worked up. In 2005, that profile was tested against a nationwide database, but no matches were found. It wasn't until a relative uploaded her own profile onto a genealogical website that detectives were able to connect the dots and to identify the perpetrator. He had no other connection to Michelle and no apparent motive; in the intervening years he had lived quietly as a family man.

For decades it appeared that justice would never be served in Michelle Martinko's cold case. But God always sees the wickedness of individuals and nations. We may cry out, as did the prophet, "How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?" (Habakkuk 1:2). And in crying out, we may feel that God is slow to act. But God's timing is not ours. Though evil in all eras seems to prevail, in the end justice wins.

B. Lesson Context: Isaiah and His Times

The prophet Isaiah had a lengthy ministry in Judah. (The books of Isaiah and 2 Kings contain most of the information we have about the prophet Isaiah.) Isaiah 1:1 places that ministry in the days of “Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” The first dated event is the death of Uzziah (also called Azariah; 2 Kings 15:1, 6–8, 17, 23, 27) in about 739 BC (Isaiah 6:1), the same year Isaiah received his call (see time line to the right). The final dated event is the death of King Sennacherib of Assyria, who died in 681 BC (37:38).

Isaiah had the most direct association with two kings of Judah: Ahaz (Isaiah 7:1–17) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 19–20; Isaiah 38). Isaiah seems to have had free access to the palace. This has caused some to think that he may have been a member of the royal family.

Judah experienced great changes politically, economically, militarily, and spiritually during Isaiah’s prophetic ministry. Uzziah in Judah and his contemporary Jeroboam II in Israel did well militarily. The land area under the control of the two nations was similar to what it had been in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:28).

Jotham succeeded Uzziah as king of Judah and became mighty because of his good life before the Lord. But the people were corrupt spiritually (2 Chronicles 27:1–2). Ahaz followed Jotham on the throne and became the spiritual opposite of his father. Ahaz even practiced child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). Ahaz and Judah were attacked by Israel, and Judah suffered greatly.

Hezekiah eventually succeeded Ahaz, and Hezekiah was a faithful follower of the Lord. Judah prospered at first, but then was devastated militarily by a king of Assyria, Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13–16). The exile that had befallen northern Israel in 722 BC was also to befall Judah, but not at the hands of the Assyrians.

C. Lesson Context: Isaiah and the Future

Isaiah 39:5–6 predicts a captivity in Babylon. (Isaiah 36–39 runs parallel to 2 Kings 18:13–20:19.) Isaiah wrote as though Babylon had already conquered Judah, but his prophecies predated Babylon’s existence as an empire by about 150 years!

At the time Isaiah wrote, Babylon was a major city in the Assyrian Empire. Babylon rebelled between 700–689 BC in an attempt to overthrow Assyria, which destroyed the city in retaliation. Even so, the Babylonians ultimately destroyed and replaced the Assyrians. A key event was the destruction of Nineveh, Assyria’s capital city, in 612 BC.

God had at least two plans for the Babylonian Empire: to bring about the end of the Assyrian Empire and to punish the people of Judah because of their idolatry (2 Chronicles 24:18; Isaiah 10:3–19; etc.). Babylon would take Judah into captivity in waves. This began in 598 BC (2 Kings 24:10–16) and culminated with the destruction of Jerusalem and its aftermath in 586 BC (2 Kings 25).

I. Failed Confidence

(ISAIAH 47:10–11)

A. God Complex (v. 10)

10a. “You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, ‘No one sees me.’

The word *you* refers to Babylon, whom the prophecy concerns (Isaiah 47:1). Babylon's *wickedness* was a show of power, designed to enforce compliance by means of fear. We keep in mind that Isaiah was writing many decades before Babylon's rise as a world power. Yet so certain is Isaiah's prophecy that he writes not only in future tense, but also in past tense!

The phrase *No one sees me* implies that the Babylonian Empire viewed itself as above accountability for its actions; the people of Judah and Jerusalem were similarly guilty (see Isaiah 29:15–16). The scope of *no one* can encompass the entirety of the heavens and the earth. The Babylonian Empire had not faced any consequences from either sphere for exercising its enormous power inhumanely, which led to the supposition that unjust treatment was acceptable—a “might makes right” philosophy.

Such a philosophy still permeates many societies: “If my country is the strongest, then surely *everything* my nation does is sanctioned by God.” We do well to remember that God uses the nations as he sees fit, not according to our limited understandings of power and influence.

10b. “Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me.’

This half verse speaks to an exercise in self-delusion (compare Isaiah 5:21; 44:19–20). All true *wisdom* and *knowledge* begin with “the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 1:7). Claiming to be wise or knowledgeable apart from God's teaching is foolishness (Isaiah 29:14–15; 1 Corinthians 1:20–21).

Babylon trusted in its military and political might to the degree that it imagined its every move to have been mandated by a god. To put it another way, the empire ended up seeing itself as the god who justified its own actions. Their twisted self-image that *I am, and there is none besides me* was a claim of godhood (contrast Exodus 3:14).

The temptation to set oneself up as a god has proved itself irresistible throughout the generations. Adam and Eve sinned by wanting to be like God (Genesis 3:4–6), and we have all inherited sinful tendencies to put ourselves in God's place (example: Ezekiel 28:2). Phrases like “in their own eyes” often accompany condemnations of self-delusion in this regard (Psalm 36:2; Proverbs 26:12; 28:11; 30:12; Isaiah 5:21; compare 1 Corinthians 3:18–20).

We see extreme examples in modern-day cult leaders claiming divinity. But anytime someone acts as though his or her concerns are the ultimate concerns, danger looms. We all must be wary of our own, personal tendencies to behave as though we are the ultimate authority in our own lives. Nothing good can come of trying to unseat the Creator.

B. God's Guarantee (v. 11)

11a. “Disaster will come upon you, and you will not know how to conjure it away.

The Hebrew word translated *disaster* is the same word that was translated “wickedness” in the previous verse. The *KJV* “evil” retains the element of sinfulness that is not necessarily present in the *NIV* translation. This implies that a moral evil is to overtake Babylon. In context, it is clear that this consequence comes from the Lord as punishment for Babylon's deeds.

We should note that God does not inflict moral evil on anyone (see James 1:13). That's on us (1:14). We bring it on ourselves (example: 1 Timothy 6:9). But God does permit both moral and physical evils in allowing natural consequences of our own actions. And although God never inflicts moral evils, he is known to have strengthened the preexisting evil resolve of people (compare Exodus 8:32 with 9:12), in addition to inflicting what are called physical evils or natural disasters (Genesis 19; etc.).

Punishment would come as a shock to the Babylonians. They would neither foresee its coming nor be able to thwart it. Their "sorceries" and "spells" would be powerless to stave off God's wrath (Isaiah 47:9, not in today's text; 47:12, below). They who had been the instrument of God's wrath on Judah would find the tables reversed as they became the object of that same wrath (47:6).

11b. "A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom; a catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.

The Hebrew word translated *calamity* occurs only three times in the Old Testament: here and twice in Ezekiel 7:26. It is used as a parallel description with "disaster" (above) and *catastrophe*. It may be tempting to try and discern the differences among these three words, but it's more likely that the cumulative effect is intended: the punishment is going to be worse than the Babylonians could possibly imagine! Nothing they could do would prevent its coming or mitigate its terrible impact.

II. Failed Defenses

(ISAIAH 47:12–15)

A. Futile Future-Telling (vv. 12–13)

12. "Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have labored at since childhood. Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will cause terror.

Magic spells and *sorceries* were common practices in the ancient Near East, meant to give people insight into their gods' desires and intentions. In fact, Israel's faith was meant to be unique in the ancient Near East for refusing such means to divine God's will, looking instead to his chosen prophets and other leaders.

This is not to say that such works were seen as useless; the magicians in Egypt were successful up to a point when Moses confronted the pharaoh (Exodus 7:9–12, 22a; 8:7; contrast 8:18), and the medium at Endor called up Samuel's spirit for Saul (1 Samuel 28:3–15a). Refusing to participate in practices that actually *could* affect reality was surely a higher, harder calling than eschewing rituals that never had any discernible impact.

Note that this magic was not meant to be entertainment (as in illusions) but, instead, intended to manipulate their gods into doing what the people wanted or needed (example: 1 Kings 18:26–29). God cannot be manipulated and does not tolerate anyone trying to force his hand. Given the intentions of these magical interventions, it's no surprise that every variety of sorcery or witchcraft was forbidden in Israel (Leviticus 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:9–14; etc.).

Isaiah mocked Babylon by encouraging them to continue in worthless magical practices. Who knew—maybe these would succeed! But Isaiah knew that God would not allow such practices to

benefit Babylon any longer. Their days of brutalizing other nations with their might were numbered. Similar sarcastic calls can be found in Job 38:31; Jeremiah 44:25; Amos 4:4; and Matthew 23:32. Various means of future-telling were prevalent in the first century, when the church was being established. Clashes with dark powers always resulted in God's wisdom and power being found greater (Acts 8:9; 13:6–12; 16:16–18; 19:19).

13a. "All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!"

Bad advice is tiring. Though Babylon did not realize it yet, *all the counsel* they sought were useless and would only weary them in trying to discover the truth and prevent disaster (Isaiah 57:10; Jeremiah 51:58; Habakkuk 2:13). And yet their "wisdom" would continue to be sought (see next)!

13b. "Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you."

The astrologers and the *stargazers* all searched the sky for signs of the gods' doings (compare Daniel 2:2). The practice was especially prevalent in Babylon. Calendars were drawn up based on the movements of heavenly bodies. These calendars were believed to reveal blessed or cursed days so that the people could act appropriately. We should note that there was not a clear distinction between the practices of astrology and astronomy at the time. This distinction is well made today, however, as the scientific study of the universe beyond planet Earth is an opportunity to experience renewed awe at *all* that God created.

In at least one instance, watching the night sky led wise men to a glorious discovery (Matthew 2:1–2, 7, 9–10). This exception only proves God's great mercy and willingness to meet people where they are and *literally* lead them to seek Jesus. In Babylon's case, however, even if these stargazers were correct in their predictions and knew when and *what is coming upon* Babylon, they would not be able to find a way to *save* the nation.

B. Fiery Fortunes (vv. 14–15)

14. "Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame. These are not coals for warmth; this is not a fire to sit by."

They refers to the "wise" men who were trusted to read the sky and guide the people to right actions based on what they saw (see Isaiah 47:13b, above). These learned men were thought to be a source of light in the form of knowledge and thus safety through wise living. But instead, these very counselors would be the *stubble* that feeds *the fire* that blazes dangerously, devouring everything it touches.

15. "That is all they are to you—these you have dealt with and labored with since childhood. All of them go on in their error; there is not one that can save you."

Riches often make a people feel safe. The presence of successful merchants in Babylon was another source of false security. Though Babylon had believed these friends were like a homey fire, keeping them warm and safe, such businessmen were actually the stubble to be burned up. It will turn out that Babylon and all its allies are doomed; *not one* would *save* them.

Conclusion

A. God's Timing

Israel can be likened to Michelle Martinko's parents—waiting for justice that never seemed to be within reach. Advancements in DNA technology became the antidote to the “magic” of all the circumstances that allowed the killer to go unpunished for so many years. But no amount of luck or skill would prevent Babylon's fall, just as it did not prevent the murderer's conviction.

God is not surprised at what happens among and within the nations of the world. Every group of people falls under God's jurisdiction, and he can use any and all nations to fulfill his purposes. We Christians do well to remember and trust that God sees the injustice and violence around us and has a plan to right all wrongs.

Though our enemies may never see the error of their ways or repent, we know our faith in God is not misplaced and will result in our seeing his plan come to fruition. Faith in anything else results in disappointment and misplaced priorities. May we trust his timing and wait patiently for the day he destroys wickedness once and for all. His promises are steadfast.

B. Prayer

Almighty God, thank you that we can be confident in your knowledge about our lives and in your wisdom concerning judgment. We ask for strength to live faithfully even when the present and future seem nothing like we expected. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Since God's enemies will fall,
don't stand with them!