

Warnings to the Wicked

ISAIAH 1:30

For ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water.

The two metaphors here, the oak and the garden, symbolize what will happen to the wicked. Because the wicked have chosen to worship idols that are associated with oaks and gardens, they will become, in a sense, what they have worshiped (Isaiah 1:29). They will be as valueless as an oak tree that is dying or diseased, “an oak whose leaf fadeth,” or as unfruitful and worthless as “a garden that hath no water.”

The oak tree that lacks water soon shrivels up and becomes kindling for fire. A dry garden is in a similar state. The wicked will be like kindling for the fire accompanying the second coming of Jesus that will burn all corruptible things. Spiritually, Jesus represents the living water (Isaiah 33:21; Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13; John 4:6–14). By partaking of this living water, the righteous will be spiritually quenched rather than desolate.

ISAIAH 5:11

Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!

This passage indicates revelry and unholy merrymaking among those who spend time in immoral entertainment. It warns all against making strong drink their passion. A passage from the Book of Mormon presents a prophecy that corresponds in some ways to this verse of Isaiah: “There shall be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us” (2 Nephi 28:7). But these are “false and vain and foolish doctrines” (Isaiah 5:9).

ISAIAH 5:12

And the harp, and the viol, the [tambourine], and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands.

Harp, tambourines, and other instruments were played in antiquity (Genesis 4:21; Psalm 137:2) and are mentioned in Isaiah’s prophecies (Isaiah 5:12; 24:8). The King James Version of the Bible uses the word “tabret,” which is usually translated “tambourine” in modern English Bibles.

Instruments were used in worship. They were also played at banquets and feasts where merrymakers partook of wine and strong drink and participated in revelries. Apparently, harlots played their harps as they wandered around the city attempting to attract attention (Isaiah 23:16).

ISAIAH 5:18

Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope.

This verse creates an image of a beast of burden, such as a donkey or ox, pulling a cart of goods. The beast represents a wicked person and the cart represents sin. The wicked are burdened with sins, which they drag behind them, just as a beast of burden hauls its load from place to place.

The verse also suggests that vanity is the key component from which the cords are made. Many commit sins and then drag them after themselves because of vanity and pride. Sin is sometimes as difficult to break as a thick rope that is strong enough to pull a cart, but it is possible to break sin with the help of Christ. The Lord says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

ISAIAH 13:14

And it shall be as the chased roe and as a sheep that no man taketh up.

Isaiah compares deer and sheep in precarious situations to wicked people during the judgments of the last days. A "chased roe" is a hunted deer, and "sheep that no man taketh up" are vulnerable because their shepherds are absent. The imagery implies that the wicked will be like hunted deer. They will flee for their lives during a time of wars.

ISAIAH 22:15-16

Thus saith the Lord God of hosts, Go, get thee unto this treasurer, even unto Shebna . . . and say, what hast thou here? . . . that thou hast hewed thee out a sepulchre here, as he that heweth him out a sepulchre on high, and that graveth an habitation for himself in a rock?

Isaiah speaks of a historical character, Shebna, who was Isaiah's contemporary and likely acquainted with him. Shebna was an important and influential government official or treasurer who served in the court of Hezekiah, king of Judah (Isaiah 22:15; 37:2). Shebna, a proud, wealthy man, is rebuked by the Lord for his arrogance in building himself a monumental tomb.

Shebna apparently had prepared a sepulcher in a high and conspicuous place, a monument to himself for all to view. In doing so, he was setting himself up "on high." Therefore, Isaiah prophesies that a judgment will fall upon the treasurer's head. Shebna would lose his important position in the kingdom of Judah. He would be violently carried into captivity, his glory would become shame, and he would die in exile (vv. 17-19).

The location of Shebna's sepulcher is unknown, although some scholars place it with other tombs carved in rock in the valley of Kidron, east of Jerusalem. Shebna symbolizes all proud and arrogant people.

ISAIAH 25:11-12

He shall bring down their pride together with the spoils of their hands. And the fortress of the high fort of thy walls shall he bring down, lay low, and bring to the ground, even to the dust.

Jehovah plays an active role in the events that will occur during the last days and at his second coming. This is set forth in Isaiah 25:6–12 and other passages. In verse 11, Isaiah prophesies that the Lord will bring down the pride of the wicked, along with the spoil, or the things they have gained through treacherous deeds. (See Proverbs 16:18 for another description of the fate of the proud.)

In verse 12, Isaiah prophesies that the fortresses of the wicked—symbolic of reliance on military might, the arm of flesh, and worldly powers—will be destroyed. To emphasize the completeness of their destruction, Isaiah uses repetitive language: “bring down,” “lay low,” “bring down to the ground,” and “to the dust.”

ISAIAH 28:20

For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it.

This verse pertains to Isaiah’s prophecy that the Assyrian army would scourge the southern kingdom of Judah (Isaiah 28:14–22). This scourge would come because of Judah’s wicked practices and failure to recognize that Jehovah is God and King. The scourge would come day and night, and when the inhabitants heard of it, they would be visibly frightened.

Isaiah compares the fear of Judah’s inhabitants to one who lies in his bed but cannot find comfort. In the same way that a small bed is too short for a tall person or a small blanket does not adequately cover an adult, the wicked would not find adequate calm or protection from the Assyrian scourge.

ISAIAH 46:1

Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, their idols were upon the beasts, and upon the cattle: your carriages were heavy loaden; they are a burden to the weary beast.

The term “idols” refers both to heathen deities constructed of wood, stone, or other materials and to more abstract things that people worship. People may become excessively devoted to wealth, the honor of men, or worldly things. Isaiah also speaks of idols in Isaiah 2:8, 18, 20; 10:10–11; 19:1, 3; and 31:7. The law of Moses speaks clearly against the creation and worship of idols (Exodus 20:3–4).

In the belief system of the Babylonians, Bel and Nebo were two chief gods. Bel was the father of all other gods. Nebo was the god of learning and wisdom. Idols representing these gods had no power to help themselves against the encroachments of enemies. They were carried away on the backs of beasts into captivity and could not prevent it (Isaiah 46:1–2). The idols were equally powerless to help the people who worshiped them.

In contrast to the idols, Jehovah carries his people “from the womb,” and he continues to carry them “even to [their] old age” (vv. 3–4). While the idols have no power to deliver even themselves, Jehovah delivers his people (vv. 2, 4). The idol worshipers may spend a fortune on their images, but idols cannot help them in their time of “trouble” (vv. 6–7).

ISAIAH 46:6

They lavish gold out of the bag, and weigh silver in the balance, and they hire a goldsmith; and he maketh it a god: they fall down, yea, they worship.

Idol worshipers from biblical times would sometimes hire a smith to make a god from gold or silver. They would pray to it and show reverence to it. Occasionally, priests and worshipers built temples to house their idols and offered them sacrifices.

Despite the attention paid to idols, and though they are often made of precious materials, they still have no power (Isaiah 44:15–17). They cannot “answer, nor save him out of his trouble” (Isaiah 46:7).

ISAIAH 50:11

Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.

People who kindle and walk in the light of their own fire are those who walk in their own way. They act according to their own will, rather than according to the will and direction of the Lord. They seek to be spiritually self-sufficient, relying on themselves instead of on God. They attempt to create their own light, but their efforts produce no more than short-lived sparks compared to the everlasting bright light that comes from God. Sadly, they deny themselves his greater light. Such will eventually be judged by the Lord, resulting in sorrow.

ISAIAH 56:10

His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber.

Watchmen are those, particularly leaders, who know the gospel and are charged to protect it from apostasy (Ezekiel 3:17). In this passage, the watchmen themselves have become apostates. Isaiah refers to these negligent watchmen as ineffectual dogs and shepherds. Like watchdogs who have become lazy, blind, and inept, or like shepherds who are no longer able to recognize the enemy, these watchmen have left off caring for their flock. They have turned instead to caring for their own needs and desires. (See Ezekiel 34:1–28 for a detailed description of indolent shepherds and the Lord’s reaction to them).

The Lord's criticism of these unrighteous leaders is scathing. He calls them blind watchmen, "ignorant," "dumb dogs," "greedy dogs," and "shepherds that cannot understand" (Isaiah 56:10–11). Besides describing Israel's religious leaders in ancient times, this prophecy may also refer to leaders of modern-day apostate religions (2 Nephi 28:3–9; Mormon 8:31–33, 37–39).

ISAIAH 57:20

The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

The Lord promises peace to the righteous. "Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the Lord; and I will heal him" (Isaiah 57:19). The wicked do not have this promise. In fact, the Lord says, "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked" (v. 21). Isaiah uses the image of a troubled sea to describe the condition of the wicked. He indicates that their life is similar to the mire and dirt that is cast up by stormy waters.

ISAIAH 59:10

We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night.

Those who have turned from the light, at least in their hearts, are unable to find their way through life. They are like the blind, or like those who have no eyes at all. Consequently, night and noon are the same to them. Spiritual brightness and darkness are indistinguishable to those who have no spiritual eyes. This is the fulfillment of a curse pronounced on the wicked by the Lord (Deuteronomy 28:28–29). The Lord has power to heal this spiritual blindness if those who suffer will repent and return unto him.

ISAIAH 59:11

We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.

Ancient Israel's anguished laments are sometimes loud like the angry roaring or growling of bears. Sometimes they are soft and subdued, like the sad moaning of doves. Why does Israel, or any person, suffer such distress? Anguish often comes because of wickedness and its fruits. Even when they inflict themselves, the wicked become angry at the troubles of sin. The passage in Isaiah 59:12–13 speaks concerning Israel's "transgressions," "sins," "iniquities," "transgressing," "lying," "departing away from our God," "speaking oppression," "revolt," and "falsehood."

ISAIAH 65:4

... which remain among the graves, and lodge in the monuments, which eat swine's flesh, and broth of abominable things is in their vessels.

In Isaiah 65:2–5, the Lord lists transgressions of his ancient covenant people: they do not walk in God’s ways, their works are evil, they walk after their own thoughts, they provoke God to anger, they sacrifice in gardens, they burn incense on altars of brick, they lodge in cemeteries, they eat the flesh of swine, they pollute their vessels, and they say to others, “I am holier than thou.”

Many of their transgressions represent clear violations of the laws God gave through Moses. For example, the statement “remain among the graves, and lodge in the monuments” may refer to an effort to communicate with the spirits of the dead, an action forbidden by Mosaic law (Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:10–12; Isaiah 8:19). The statement “eat swine’s flesh, and broth of abominable things” describes another violation of Mosaic law (Leviticus 11:7–8; Deuteronomy 14:7–8). The people were eating unclean animals or unclean sacrificial flesh (Leviticus 7:18; 19:7). And the statement “broth of abominable things is in their vessels” refers to people making their pots, pans, and dishes unclean by eating foods forbidden by the Lord.