

# Wail, You Ships of Tarshish! – Isaiah 23

**Introduction** – Tyre and Sidon, seaport cities along the Phoenician portion of the Mediterranean and at the foot of the Lebanon mountain range, were the marketplace for the nations (v3). One might compare them to present day New York City as the business capital of the known world. These city-states were not powerful because of military might but because of economic reach. There had been a time when Tyre devoted the riches of its city to Jerusalem; but Tyre had not remained faithful as a God-fearing city and that amounted to spiritual harlotry. This was to be another lesson to Judah about what true faithfulness should look like.

**Some History of Tyre** – The relationship of the Phoenicians to Israel is mixed. David and Solomon had good relations with Tyre as Hiram cooperated commercially over the building of the temple (1 Kings 5:1-12). But Tyre was not devoted to the God of Israel, and along with other foreign women, Solomon used marriages with Sidonian princesses to go after foreign gods (1 Kings 11:1-8). This led to setting up high places in Israel (2 Kings 23:13) and Isaiah would have grown up with an awareness of Tyre's corruption of Solomon. The fruit of this: 150 years before Isaiah's day, wicked Ahab, king of the Israelites, had taken Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, as his wife, and nearly made Baal-worship the national religion (1 Kings 16:31ff). But, in spite of all of this, Tyre and Sidon were basically known around the world as peaceable cities and the Phoenicians as good people to be commercially attached to if you wished to prosper as a nation.

**The Ships of Tarshish** – This phrase bookends the burden upon Tyre (v1, 14). Tarshish may be a city associated around ancient Greece or possibly even Spain. If you were a “*ship of Tarshish*” you were the mightiest of vessels that could travel to the most exotic places of the known world. The Phoenicians were known as the most advanced mariners of the seas, establishing ports and colonies via trade rather than the sword all over the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea. The declaration of the fall of these ships was a metaphor of the economic collapse of the world of commerce and trade.

**The Coming Collapse** (vv1-14) – Isaiah declares a future picture of Tyre and Sidon fallen. Her destruction reverberates across the Sea and down to Egypt (vv1-5). The question is who could have brought this upon such an old and well-respected city (vv7-8). And while the Assyrians and later the Babylonians did attack the coastal cities of Phoenicia, the final fall did not come until Alexander the Great in 322BC. Of course, it is the LORD who purposed this (v9, Dan 2:21) and He did it to dishonor the pride of all glory (v9). Although historically this took some time, God intends to bring a thorough undoing (vv10-12) and reminds them that He did just that to Babylon before (v13 – a possible reference to a prior defeat of Babylon by Assyria in 689BC). Look at the history of the world. Nations and empires, families and clans, all rise and fall over time and all according to the unthwartable hand of God. Human pride is as old as the Garden. And it is that old pride that brought judgment upon Tyre (see Ezek 26-28, i.e. 27:3-7, 25-26, 28:1-5, 17).

**Song of the Lonely Harlot** (vv15-16) – That is what pride is like and what it ultimately looks like: a very old harlot wishing she could still seduce her customers.

**Strange Grace upon the Harlot City** (vv17-18) – Tyre's harlotry is her self-exalting pride and unfaithfulness to Yahweh before Whom she had once been dedicated to. Instead of devoting her strength, wealth and reputation to the building of the temple (and God's kingdom) she sought to enhance herself. And yet, the LORD “deals” with Tyre, restoring her to her hire (v17, a strange way of speaking of her restoration). But this time, in His grace, the wages of this city will be set apart for the LORD (v18); Tyre's wealth will again be sanctified and devoted to the temple (recorded in Ezra 3:7 as a token of what later will come – Isaiah 2:1-4, 60:5, Acts 21:3).

**Another Example for Judah** – And certainly another example for all nations, ours first. Tyre was peaceable as nations went in that day. Her riches came by trade; but Tyre forgot God. Wealth can breed an illusion of self-sufficiency which makes God seem irrelevant. But this is all about nations, and these chapters of burdens against nations are all about nations. What does this have to do with me?

**God Will Send Individuals to Heaven or Hell** – John the Baptist said it well: “*He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him*” (John 3:36). Your parents may have faith in the promises of God for you (and they should), but you may not rest on their faith, or their testimony, or your pedigree. You alone must put your faith in the Son of God or you will not have eternal life. And yes, your works do testify to whether or not that faith is a living faith, a saving faith (James 2:14-20).

**To Hell with Respectable Sinners** (Luke 12:13-21) – There are aggressive, violent, outwardly wicked people who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. But there are also very nice, pleasant, quiet - but godless people who also will not. You do not have to be a murderer or a child-molester in order to fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). The rich man in this parable could be the nicest neighbor you ever had. But he did not live to the glory of God; he did not love God. Following this parable, Jesus says two very important things that pertain to what we have been talking about. First, “*do not fear little flock...*” (Luke 12:32) for those who have ears to hear. Second, “*for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*” (v34). Christianity is not a religion for good little boys and girls – because there are none.

Where was Tyre's treasure? Where is America's treasure? But more importantly, where is *your* treasure?