

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 23 is an oracle of judgment against Tyre, the great Phoenician commercial city that dominated Mediterranean trade throughout the ancient Near East. The passage opens with a summons to wail — ships of Tarshish are called to mourn because Tyre, their home port and commercial lifeblood, has been destroyed (vv. 1–5). The oracle then calls Tyre’s inhabitants to cross over to Tarshish, to Kittim (Cyprus), to the coastlands — there is no home left for them (vv. 6–7). A rhetorical question is raised: who has purposed this against Tyre, the city that bestowed crowns, whose merchants were princes? The LORD of hosts has purposed it — to humble all the pride of glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth (vv. 8–9). A brief address to Tarshish follows, and then Sidon — Tyre’s sister city — is commanded to be ashamed, for the sea itself has spoken against her (vv. 10–12). A historical note about Assyria’s role is introduced as a reference point (v. 13), followed by a renewed summons to the ships of Tarshish to wail (v. 14). Verses 15–17 introduce a remarkable temporal prediction: Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, and then — in language bordering on the shocking — she will return to her trade “like a prostitute,” plying her commerce across all the kingdoms of the earth. The oracle closes in verses 17–18 with an unexpected eschatological reversal: Tyre’s merchandise and wages will eventually be “holy to the LORD,” set apart for those who dwell before Him, for abundant food and stately clothing.

This Text — Intent

God is demonstrating through the fall of Tyre that no human system of power, wealth, or commercial greatness stands beyond His sovereign jurisdiction — and that even instruments of trade and worldly splendor can ultimately be consecrated to His purposes. The intent is not merely to predict Tyre’s destruction but to confront every reader who trusts in the stability of economic systems, commercial prestige, or worldly honor with the unshakeable reality that the LORD of hosts alone governs the rise and fall of earthly powers. The oracle’s unexpected closing — Tyre’s commerce becoming holy to the LORD — presses further still: God does not merely destroy what opposes Him; He reclaims and redirects it. The reader is meant to be simultaneously humbled in their confidence in earthly economic structures and reoriented toward the only power whose purposes cannot be thwarted.

Subject Sentence: The LORD dismantles the world’s greatest commercial empire to display His sovereign authority over all earthly glory.

Primary Claim: The LORD of hosts — not markets, not merchant princes, not naval supremacy — holds the power to raise and ruin every earthly system of wealth; no commercial greatness is stable, glorious, or ultimate except as He ordains it, and even Tyre’s plunder can be made holy to Him.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Identity and Scope of “Tyre” in This Oracle

The primary interpretive question concerns how far to extend the referent of “Tyre.” Some interpreters — particularly those in allegorical or typological traditions — read Tyre throughout prophetic Scripture (especially Ezekiel 26–28 and Isaiah 23) as a cipher for Babylon-like world empire, or even for the Antichrist system (cf. Revelation 18’s heavy resonance with Ezekiel’s Tyre oracle). This reading is not without textual warrant: the language of Isaiah 23:8–9 moves from the specific city to a universal claim — “to dishonor all the honored of the earth” — that clearly has universal scope. However, the burden of the oracle is carried by the specific historical city of Tyre, and the referent should not be dissolved into allegory. The Reformed reading is to hold together the particular and the universal: Tyre is genuinely Tyre, and the oracle’s universal claims are drawn *from* the particular case, not imposed upon it from outside. Tyre is a paradigm case, not a symbol substituted for the real subject.

The “Seventy Years” of Verse 15

Dispensational interpreters sometimes align this seventy-year period with the Babylonian exile (605–535 BC), arguing for precise prophetic correspondence. This requires some chronological gymnastics, as Tyre’s actual subjugation history does not map cleanly onto a seventy-year period in the way Jerusalem’s exile does. The more defensible reading — preferred by Oswalt, Motyer, and mainstream Reformed commentators — is that the “seventy years” functions as a conventional round figure for a complete period of divine judgment, much as Jeremiah uses the figure for Babylon (Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10). It means “a full generation of judgment” rather than a calendrically precise prediction. This reading is consistent with the oracle’s rhetorical character and avoids over-specifying prophetic numbers in ways the text does not warrant.

The “Prostitute” Metaphor of Verses 15–17

The explicit prostitution imagery applied to Tyre’s return to commerce has generated discomfort in some expositors, who soften it into mere commercial imagery. This should be resisted. The prostitution metaphor is deliberate and carries significant moral weight: Tyre’s commerce is characterized throughout the prophets as seductive, self-serving, and idolatrous in its orientation — it entices nations into relationship with Tyre for the sake of Tyre’s enrichment, not their welfare. This is precisely the critique leveled against Babylon

in Revelation 18. The Reformed reading retains the moral force of the metaphor: commercial power, when it becomes self-deifying and exploitative, is rightly described as harlotry against the LORD who owns all trade and wealth.

The Eschatological Consecration of Tyre's Commerce (vv. 17–18)

This closing is the most theologically striking and most frequently neglected section. Some dispensational readers attach this to a millennium-era prosperity passage. Some commentators dismiss it as conditional or speculative. The Reformed reading sees here a genuine eschatological movement: God's ultimate purpose is not merely to judge commercial hubris but to reclaim it — to bring what was profane into the service of His kingdom. This resonates with the broader Isaianic vision (Isaiah 60–62) in which the wealth of the nations flows into Zion. The oracle does not end at judgment; it ends at consecration. This is the gospel-shaped ending — destruction is not the final word; redemption and reorientation of the fallen order toward God's glory is.

Key Canonical Support

- **Ezekiel 26–28** — The extended oracle against Tyre in Ezekiel develops the same themes with far greater elaboration: Tyre's commercial pride, her beauty, her fall, and the grieving of her trading partners. Ezekiel 28:11–19 pushes into cosmic dimensions (the "king of Tyre" as an Edenic figure), grounding commercial hubris in the primordial fall of pride. Together, Isaiah 23 and Ezekiel 26–28 constitute the prophetic canon's fullest treatment of commercial power as a spiritual and theological problem.
- **Revelation 18** — The fall of Babylon in Revelation 18 is explicitly modeled on the Tyre oracles of Ezekiel and Isaiah: the weeping of merchants, the smoke of her burning, the call to "come out of her." The New Testament's application of this prophetic template to Rome/Babylon demonstrates that Isaiah 23's judgment on Tyre functions paradigmatically — every commercial empire that divinizes its own wealth and seduces the nations stands under the same verdict.
- **Isaiah 60:5–7, 10–11** — The eschatological vision of Isaiah 60 shows the wealth of the nations flowing into the new Jerusalem, with former opponents now bringing tribute. This is the canonical fulfillment of Isaiah 23:18's unexpected promise: Tyre's commerce becoming "holy to the LORD." Commercial wealth is not destroyed in the final kingdom but redirected and consecrated.
- **Psalms 2** — The declaration that the kings and rulers of the earth take counsel together against the LORD, and that He who sits in the heavens laughs, undergirds the theological claim of Isaiah 23:8–9: the LORD of hosts has purposed Tyre's fall "to dishonor all the honored of the earth." No commercial or political greatness operates outside His sovereign decree.

- **Matthew 11:21–22** — Jesus’ reference to Tyre in His judgment speech against Chorazin and Bethsaida — “It will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you” — demonstrates that the prophetic oracles against Tyre remain theologically alive in the New Testament and carry eschatological weight, not merely historical interest.

Aim: To confront the reader’s functional trust in economic stability and commercial prestige with the sovereign authority of the LORD of hosts, and to reorient their hope toward the One whose purposes alone cannot be thwarted — and who reclaims even the ruins of worldly glory for His own ends.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Ships of Tarshish called to wail; Tyre is laid waste, no house, no harbor; news comes from Cyprus	Opening summons to mourning; Tarshish = distant western trade routes (Spain/Sardinia); Cyprus as relay point
2–3	Coastland merchants and Sidon called to be still; the Nile’s grain and the harvest of the Nile were Tyre’s revenue; she was the merchant of nations	Tyre’s economic reach: grain from Egypt, trade across the Mediterranean; “merchant of nations” establishes her commercial grandeur
4	Sidon called to be ashamed; the sea and the stronghold of the sea have spoken — “I have neither labored nor given birth”	The sea itself mourns its loss of Tyre; striking personification; Sidon as related Phoenician city feels the collapse
5	When the report comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish over the report about Tyre	Even Egypt — a great power — is shaken; Tyre’s fall is geopolitically seismic
6–7	Call to cross over to Tarshish; wail, you inhabitants of the coastland; is this your exultant city whose origin is from days of old, whose feet carried her to settle far away?	Rhetorical contrast: once glorious, now refugee; antiquity of Tyre (history going back centuries) used to heighten the shock of her fall

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
8	Who has purposed this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth?	Central rhetorical question; “bestower of crowns” = Tyre’s commercial power elevated even kings; “merchants were princes” = commercial authority rivaling political authority
9	The LORD of hosts has purposed it — to defile the pride of all glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth	The answer: God. The purpose: universal humbling of human pride and honor. This is the theological center of the oracle
10	Cross over your land like the Nile, O daughter of Tarshish; there is no restraint anymore	Tarshish now flooded — freed of its dependence on Tyre; or: the girdle/restraint of the sea-trade network is gone
11	The LORD has stretched out His hand over the sea; He has shaken the kingdoms; He has commanded concerning Canaan to destroy its strongholds	The LORD’s active hand behind geopolitical events; Canaan (the coastland region including Tyre) under His direct command
12	Tyre addressed: no more exulting, O oppressed virgin daughter of Sidon; arise, cross over to Cyprus — even there you will have no rest	Tyre stripped of her identity and glory; “virgin” = never before conquered; “oppressed” = now humbled; even Cyprus offers no refuge
13	Historical note: Assyria founded Tyre for wild beasts; they erected their siege towers, stripped her palaces, made her a ruin	Assyria referenced as a prior instrument of judgment; the historical pattern reinforces God’s ongoing use of nations to judge nations
14	Renewed summons: wail, O ships of Tarshish, for your stronghold is laid waste	Refrain from v. 1; envelope structure; the lament is sealed
15	Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, like the days of one king; at the end of seventy years, it will happen	Temporal prediction of a complete period of judgment; the “prostitute” metaphor introduced for

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute	Tyre's return to commerce
16	Direct address to the forgotten prostitute: take a harp, go about the city, play many songs, that you may be remembered	The image is vivid: Tyre reduced to playing for attention in the streets, hawking herself to whoever will trade
17	At the end of seventy years the LORD will visit Tyre, and she will return to her wages and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world	God permits Tyre to resume commerce — language of divine ordination; “prostitute herself” retains the moral critique even of her restored commerce
18	Her merchandise and her wages will be holy to the LORD; it will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who dwell before the LORD	Eschatological reversal and consecration: what was profane commerce becomes holy tribute; Tyre's wealth redirected to the covenant people's provision

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Summons to Mourn: The World's Greatest Trading City Has Fallen
2	6–9	The Explanation: The LORD of Hosts Has Purposed This to Humble All Human Glory
3	10–14	The Reach of the Judgment: No Harbor, No Refuge, No Rest
4	15–17	The Seventy Years and the Return: Tyre Restored, but as a Prostitute
5	18	The Eschatological Consecration: Even Tyre's Commerce Becomes Holy to

Division	Verses	Label
		the LORD

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD dismantles the world’s greatest commercial empire to display His sovereign authority over all earthly glory.

Primary Claim: The LORD of hosts — not markets, not merchant princes, not naval supremacy — holds the power to raise and ruin every earthly system of wealth; no commercial greatness is stable, glorious, or ultimate except as He ordains it, and even Tyre’s plunder can be made holy to Him.

Applications (Five)

1. Reckon honestly with where your stability actually lives. (*Mind/Belief*) Tyre was not merely wealthy — she was the economic anchor of the known world. Nations depended on her. Kings owed their crowns to her trade networks. And God toppled her with a word. The reader who has quietly built their sense of security on the stability of markets, employment structures, retirement accounts, or economic systems is building on Tyrian ground. This passage does not call for financial irresponsibility, but it demands a reckoning: if the thing that must remain stable for you to feel safe is not the LORD of hosts, you are trusting something He has already demonstrated He can and will bring to nothing. Name the economic structure you are trusting. Now ask whether it survived Tyre.

2. Grieve the functional worship of commercial greatness in your own heart. (*Affections/Worship*) Isaiah 23:8 is arresting: Tyre’s merchants *were* princes; her traders *were* the honored of the earth. The oracle does not merely describe commerce — it diagnoses the heart beneath it: commerce as identity, as prestige, as a path to honor, as a quasi-religious ordering of human life. The reader is invited to feel the weight of God’s verdict — “to defile the pride of all glory” — not merely as geopolitical fact but as a word addressed to the places in our own hearts where we hunger for the kind of honor and status that commercial success promises. The mourning called for in verses 1–5 is appropriate not just for Tyre’s traders but for anyone whose heart has bent toward commercial glory as a source of worth.

3. Stop treating economic collapse — personal or corporate — as evidence that God has lost control. (*Mind/Belief*) The natural reading of Tyre’s fall, for anyone inside that economy, would be chaos, randomness, the collapse of the world order. Isaiah 23:9 gives the definitive counter-interpretation: *the LORD of hosts has purposed it*. Market crashes, business failures, industry disruptions, and personal financial reversals are not God’s absence from history — they are often, in the sovereignty of God, precisely the instruments by which He is “defiling the pride of all glory” and doing His most significant work. The

expositor must press this: not as a glib spiritualization of suffering, but as a refusal to let circumstances define the theological reading of events. God is not surprised. God is not reactive. God has purposed it.

4. Actively refuse the seduction of commercial prestige as a substitute for kingdom significance. (*Will/Behavior*) The prostitute metaphor of verses 15–17 is deliberately provocative. Tyre’s commerce is seductive — it offers what every human heart wants: to be sought after, to be significant, to have the nations come to you. This is not abstract. Every Christian professional who has allowed their sense of significance to migrate from their identity before God to their commercial success, their market position, or their professional reputation has drifted toward Tyre. The concrete behavioral call of this passage is to identify one specific arena of commercial life where the seduction toward worldly honor has taken hold and to deliberately subordinate it — in posture, in decision-making, in how you talk about your work — to the claim that only God can honor in ways that matter.

5. Hold your commercial resources loosely enough that they can be consecrated. (*Affections/Worship*) Isaiah 23:18 is the passage’s most surprising word: Tyre’s merchandise and her wages will be holy to the LORD — not stored, not hoarded, but flowing to those who dwell before Him. The eschatological vision is of commercial wealth that has been reclaimed, redirected, and made tributary to the covenant community’s flourishing. The applicational force is this: God’s ultimate intention for the wealth He distributes through commerce is that it serve His people and His purposes, not that it be hoarded by its temporary stewards. The reader whose hand is closed over their commercial resources — unable to give, unwilling to deploy wealth in service of the kingdom — is living in the mode Tyre inhabited before the judgment, not the mode God envisions at the end of it. Open the hand.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 23 makes an absolute claim about divine sovereignty: the LORD of hosts governs the rise and fall of every human commercial and political system, without exception. The phrase “the LORD of hosts has purposed it” (v. 9) is not a claim about God’s general providence — it is a claim about God’s active, specific intentionality in the destruction of the world’s greatest commercial power. This is a God who is not absent from economic history but is actively working within it to accomplish His purposes. The passage also establishes that wealth and commercial glory, when they become objects of human pride and sources of identity, stand under God’s judgment — not because commerce itself is evil, but because misplaced ultimate trust in any earthly system is an affront to the LORD who alone governs all things. The eschatological turn in verse 18 adds a further dimension: God’s purpose for commercial wealth is not its annihilation but its consecration — its reorientation from self-serving accumulation to service of His people and His glory.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Isaiah 23 is a premier text for the Reformed understanding of God's exhaustive sovereignty over all human history and culture — not merely over explicitly religious events but over trade routes, merchant networks, naval power, and economic systems. The Reformation's recovery of a truly sovereign God — one who governs all things, not merely ecclesiastical affairs — finds strong grounding here. Furthermore, the oracle's anti-idolatry thrust resonates deeply with the Reformed diagnosis of sin: the heart manufactures substitutes for God in every domain of life, and commercial prestige is among the most powerful. The closing consecration of Tyre's commerce in verse 18 anticipates the Reformed vision of cultural and commercial life under the Lordship of Christ — not withdrawn from the world, but all things brought under His authority and made tributary to His purposes. This is the Kuyperian vision grounded in Isaianic prophecy: there is not one square inch of commercial life over which Christ does not say "Mine." The gospel does not merely save souls out of the world's economic systems; it reclaims those systems for the glory of the one true Merchant-King.

Main Takeaway

The wealthiest, most strategically indispensable commercial city in the ancient world was brought to nothing by a word from the LORD of hosts — not by market forces, not by military miscalculation, but by God's sovereign purpose to make plain that no human system of glory is ultimate. If your security lives in anything Tyre-shaped — a stable economy, a thriving business, a professional reputation that makes nations come to you — you have built on ground God has already claimed the right to overturn. And the most remarkable word in this oracle is the last: God does not merely destroy what is built in pride; He reclaims it. The ruins of commercial glory, redirected, become holy to the LORD. That is both the warning and the invitation.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the oracle to ancient history with no present address.** The most common failure with prophetic oracles against foreign nations is to treat them as historically interesting but applicationally inert — interesting for what they tell us about Assyria's rise or Tyre's geography, but having nothing to say to a contemporary congregation. Isaiah 23 makes universal theological claims explicitly (v. 9: "to dishonor all the honored of the earth"), and the preacher must press those universal claims to their present application. The oracle is not merely a record of Tyre's fall — it is a permanent theological verdict on every Tyre-like structure in every age.

- **Missing the eschatological turn in verse 18 and ending at judgment.** Many expositions of Isaiah 23 close at the judgment of Tyre without engaging the extraordinary consecration promised in verse 18. This produces a truncated gospel — law without grace, judgment without restoration. The oracle’s full shape is judgment *followed by* reclamation. Tyre’s commerce becoming “holy to the LORD” is not a footnote; it is the theological destination of the oracle and must not be omitted. Sermons that end at verse 17 have left out the passage’s most surprising — and most gospel-shaped — word.
- **Spiritualizing away the commercial specificity.** The opposite error from over-historicizing is to too quickly generalize — to preach “pride falls under God’s judgment” without pressing the specific form of pride this passage addresses: commercial pride, the pride of merchant princes, the pride of economic networks that position themselves as essential. The passage is about money, trade, wealth, and the human tendency to find identity, security, and honor in commercial success. The preacher should name that specifically rather than dissolving it into a generic anti-pride message.
- **Using the prostitute metaphor as a preaching parlor trick rather than a diagnostic tool.** The vivid language of verses 15–17 can tempt a preacher to use it for rhetorical effect without pressing its diagnostic force. The metaphor is not colorful decoration — it is a theological judgment about what commerce becomes when it seduces nations for self-serving ends rather than operating in God-ordained stewardship. If the metaphor is invoked without pressing its moral diagnosis of commercial idolatry, it has been misused.
- **Failing to distinguish between commerce as creation ordinance and commerce as idol.** The passage does not condemn trade per se — God Himself ordains Tyre’s restoration in verse 17 and consecrates her commerce in verse 18. A preacher who reads Isaiah 23 as an anti-business or anti-prosperity text has over-read the judgment and under-read the eschatological consecration. The Reformed reading is that commerce is a legitimate arena of human cultural activity under God’s governance, and that the problem in Tyre was not commerce but the idolization of commercial greatness. This distinction matters enormously for how the applications land with a congregation of working professionals.
- **Neglecting the Christological trajectory.** Jesus’ own reference to Tyre in Matthew 11:21–22 demonstrates that these cities remain theologically alive in the New Testament. More broadly, Revelation 18’s explicit modeling on the Tyre oracles shows that the pattern of the great commercial empire that seduces the nations and falls under divine judgment finds its ultimate fulfillment in the fall of Babylon — which is the world system in its final form. Preaching Isaiah 23 without tracing this trajectory leaves the congregation without the canonical and Christological frame that gives the oracle its full eschatological weight.

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