

LESSON 6 *May 1–7

Playing God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

After a minister had preached a searching sermon on pride, a woman who had heard the sermon waited upon him and told him that she was in much distress of mind, and that she would like to confess a great sin. The minister asked her what the sin was.

“She answered, ‘The sin of pride, for I sat for an hour before my mirror some days ago admiring my beauty.’

“‘Oh,’ responded the minister, ‘that was not a sin of pride—that was a sin of imagination!’”—C. E. McCartney, compiled by Paul Lee Tan, p. 1100.

Ever since sin was born in the heart of a mighty angel, pride has not respected the boundaries of reality (in angels or people). Nowhere is this problem seen worse than in those who harbor spiritual pride, a rather sorry trait in beings so corrupted that their salvation can be found only in the works of another in their behalf.

This week, among other things, we’ll take a look at the origin of pride and self-exaltation, the two truly original sins.

The Week at a Glance: What will be the fate of Babylon? Why is sin punished so harshly? What caused Lucifer’s downfall? What is the key element that distinguishes true religion from false religion? Does God really destroy the wicked?

Memory Text: “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (*Isaiah 25:9, NRSV*).

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 8.*

SUNDAY May 2

Doom on the Nations (*Isaiah 13*).

Isaiah 13:1 contains a new designation that names Isaiah as the author (*compare 1:1, 2:1*); it seems, also, to begin a new section of his book. Chapters 13–23 contain oracles of judgment against various nations. Let's take a look.

Why do the prophecies against the nations begin with Babylon?

Isaiah 10:5-34 had already announced judgment against Assyria, which posed the greatest danger in Isaiah's day. While Isaiah 14:24-27 briefly reiterates the Lord's plan to break Assyria, chapters 13–23 deal mainly with other threats, Babylon being the most important.

Endowed with a rich and ancient cultural, religious, and political legacy, Babylon later emerged as the superpower that conquered and exiled Judah. But from the human perspective of Isaiah's time, it would not have been readily apparent that Babylon would threaten God's people. During much of Isaiah's ministry, Assyria dominated Babylon. From 728 B.C., when Tiglath-pileser III took Babylon and was proclaimed king of Babylon under the throne name Pulu (*or Pul; see 2 Kings 15:19, 1 Chron. 5:26*), Assyrian kings retook Babylon several times (710 B.C., 702 B.C., 689 B.C., and 648 B.C.). Babylon, however, eventually would become the great superpower in the region, the power that would destroy the Judean kingdom.

Read through Isaiah 13. Notice how strong the language is. Why does a loving God do these things, or allow these things to happen? Certainly some innocent people will suffer, as well, wouldn't they (*see vs. 16*)? How do we understand this action by God? What should these texts, and all the texts in the Bible that talk about God's anger and wrath against sin and evil, tell us about the egregious nature of sin and evil? Isn't the mere fact that a God of love would respond this way enough evidence to show us just how bad sin is? We have to remember that this is Jesus speaking these warnings through Isaiah, the same Jesus who forgave, healed, pled, and admonished sinners to repent. How, in your own mind, have you come to understand this aspect of a loving God's character? Ask yourself this question, as well: Could not this wrath actually stem from His love? If so, how so? Or, look at it from another perspective, that of the Cross, where Jesus Himself, bearing the sins of the world, suffered worse than anyone else ever has suffered, even those "innocents" who suffered because of the sins of the nation. How does the suffering of Christ on the cross help answer these difficult questions?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Isaiah 13, 14, 24–27.*

Teachers Aim:

1. To illustrate the connection between literal and symbolic Babylon in prophecy.
2. To show how human agents are used in the great controversy to serve the purposes of either God or Satan.

Lesson Outline:

I. God's Love (*Isaiah 24–27*).

- A. Often we talk of God's love and judgment as opposites. But God's revelation shows them to be complementary.
- B. Judgment is the necessary result of the inability of God's love to accept sin.

II. Choose Ye This Day . . .

- A. Throughout prophecy, human agents are portrayed as fulfilling either God's or Satan's purposes. This is particularly so in Ezekiel 28 and in Isaiah 14, where the pride of rulers is compared to Lucifer's pride in challenging the Most High.
- B. Leaders must be particularly aware of how their influence impacts others.

Summary: In the great controversy between good and evil, there is no middle ground. The path you follow and whom you choose to serve determine your end in the judgment. In His mercy, God has let us know that He already has the victory. He has called us out of darkness into His light. What is our response today?

COMMENTARY

Introduction: Playing God.

In Isaiah 13–27, God presents a picture of judgment upon the nations, especially those that have had intimate contact with His truth and people. Judgment befalls these nations because of their disrespect for God (*see Isa. 13:11; 14:5, 6*). Behind all this wickedness is Satan.

I. God and Babylon.

God loved Babylon but not its ways. He would gladly have healed that nation of all its sin (*Jer. 51:8, 9*). After Isaiah's day, God brought Judah into captivity to Babylon, in order to bring His people and the people of Babylon to repentance. (*Review Jeremiah 50, 51; Daniel 1–6.*)

There is so much for us to learn from ancient Babylon's rise and fall. For example, consider Revelation 13–18.

MONDAY May 3

The Late Great City of Babylon (*Isa. 13:2-22*).

In 626 B.C. the Chaldean Nabopolassar restored Babylonian glory by making himself king in Babylon, beginning the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, and participating (with Media) in the defeat of Assyria. His son, Nebuchadnezzar II, was the king who conquered and exiled Judah.

How did the city of Babylon finally end?

In 539 B.C., when Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon for the Medo-Persian Empire (*see Daniel 5*), the city lost its independence forever. In 482 B.C. Xerxes I brutally suppressed a revolt of Babylon against Persian rule. He removed the statue of Marduk, the chief god, and apparently damaged some fortifications and temples.

Alexander the Great took Babylon from the Persians in 331 B.C. without a fight. In spite of his short-lived dream to make Babylon his eastern capital, the city declined over several centuries. By 198 A.D. the Roman, Septimus Severus, found Babylon completely deserted. So, the great city came to an end through abandonment. Today some Iraqi villagers live on parts of the ancient site, but they have not rebuilt the city as such.

The doom of Babylon, described in Isaiah 13, liberates the descendants of Jacob, who have been oppressed by Babylon (*Isa. 14:1-3*). The event that accomplished this was the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 B.C. Although he did not destroy the city, this was the beginning of the end for Babylon, and it never threatened God's people again.

Isaiah 13 dramatizes the fall of Babylon as a divine judgment. The warriors who take the city are God's agents (*vss. 2-5*). The time of judgment is called "the day of the Lord" (*vss. 6, 9*), and God's anger is so powerful it affects the stars, sun, moon, heavens, and earth (*vss. 10, 13*).

Compare Judges 5, where the song of Deborah and Barak describes the Lord as going forth with quaking of the earth and rain from the heavens (*vs. 4*). Verses 20, 21 depict the elements of nature, including stars, as fighting against the foreign oppressor.

Imagine someone living in Babylon at the height of its glory reading these words of Isaiah 13, particularly verses 19-22. How foolish and impossible they would have seemed! What other prophecies, yet unfulfilled, seem foolish and impossible to us now? Why would we be foolish, however, to dismiss them as impossible?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

II. The Main Foe Unmasked; His Kingdom Toppled.

Read Isaiah 14:12-27. Behind the puzzle of political and military conspiracies among the ancient and modern countries of the world, Satan is at work to deceive, degrade, and destroy. But God's plan ultimately prevails.

Driven by an obsession for power, Lucifer strove to exalt himself above God (*Ezek. 28:12-19*). The degree of success he had with many angels should serve as a warning to us to trust God fully (*Prov. 3:5, 6; 2 Cor. 11:2-4*).

“Through apostasy, fallen men and fallen angels are in the same confederacy, leagued to work against good. They are united in a desperate companionship. Through his evil angels, Satan contrives to form an alliance with professedly pious men, and thus he leaves the church of God. He knows that if he can induce men, as he induced the angels, to join in rebellion, under the guise of servants of God, he will have in them his most successful allies in his enterprise against heaven. Under the name of godliness, he can inspire them with his own accusing spirit, and lead them to charge God's servants with evil and guile. They are his trained detectives; their work is to create feuds, to make charges which create discord and bitterness among brethren, to set tongues in active service for Satan, to sow seeds of dissension by watching for evil, and by speaking of that which will create discord.

“I beseech all who engage in the work of murmuring and complaining because something has been said or done that does not suit them, and that does not, as they think, give them due consideration, to remember that they are carrying on the very work begun in heaven by Satan. They are following in his track, sowing unbelief, discord, and disloyalty; for no one can entertain feelings of disaffection, and keep them to himself. He must tell others that he is not treated as he should be. Thus they are led to murmur and complain. This is the root of bitterness springing up, whereby many are defiled.

“Thus Satan works today through his evil angels. He confederates with men who claim to be in the faith; and those who are trying to carry forward the work of God with fidelity, having no man's person in admiration, working without hypocrisy and partiality, will have just as severe trials brought against them as Satan can bring through those who claim to love God.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1142.

But Satan's kingdom shall be toppled, and, by divine decree, all his followers will share his fate, which is simply a result of their own repeated choices (*see Prov. 5:22, 23; 13:6; Mal. 4:1-3; Heb. 13:9; Revelation 20*).

III. Two Destinies.

Isaiah 13–27 shows the contrasting destinies of nations and peoples. Those who follow the Lord are His remnant, because they are

Fall of the Mountain “King” (*Isaiah 14*).

In response to the fall of Babylon (*Isaiah 13*), which frees God’s people (*Isa. 14:1-3*), Isaiah 14:4-23 utters a figurative taunt (*see also Mic. 2:4, Hab. 2:6*) against the king of Babylon. It is poetic, not meant to be literal, obviously, as it portrays dead kings greeting their new colleague in the realm of death (*vss. 9, 10*), where maggots and worms are his bedding (*vs. 11*). This is, simply, the Lord’s dramatic way of telling the haughty king that he shall be brought low, as other proud monarchs before him—it is not a commentary on the state of the dead!

How could Isaiah 14:12-14 apply to a king of Babylon?

Babylonian kings did not suffer from lack of self-esteem (*Daniel 4-5*). But aspiring to “be like the most High” (*Isa. 14:14*) would be beyond even the most inflated ego. While kings claimed strong connections with the gods, they were subservient to them. This was dramatically demonstrated every year on the fifth day of the Babylonian New Year Festival, in which the king was required to remove his royal insignia before approaching the statue of Marduk so his kingship could be reaffirmed. The idea of displacing even a lesser god would be crazy and suicidal.

As in Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28 identifies heaven-daring arrogance with the ruler of a city. Here also, the description goes beyond that of an earthly monarch, and God’s crosshairs come into sharper focus: The proud potentate was in the Garden of Eden, an anointed, covering, or guardian cherub on God’s holy mountain, perfect from the day he was created until sin was found in him, cast out by God, and who will eventually be destroyed with fire (*Ezek. 28:12-18*). Applied to any human being, the specific terms of this rhetoric are so figurative as to be meaningless. But Revelation 12:7-9 does tell of a mighty being who was cast out of heaven with his angels: “Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (*vs. 9, NRSV*), who deceived Eve in Eden (*Genesis 3*).

Satan has a proud imagination: “. . . you have said, ‘I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,’ yet you are but a mortal, and no god” (*Ezek. 28:2, NRSV*). His death will prove he is no god. Unlike Christ, Satan will perish in the heart of a sea of fire (*Rev. 20:10*), never to haunt the universe again.

Compare Isaiah 14:13, 14 with Matthew 11:29, John 13:5, and Philippians 2:5-8. What does this contrast tell us about the character of God as opposed to the character of Satan? What does this contrast tell us about how the Lord views pride, arrogance, and the desire for self-supremacy?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

victorious over trial and opposition. They are preserved by God's mercy and pledge to honor those who honor Him (*see Isa. 14:1, 2; 17:6-8; 24:13-15*). However, the most powerful and exalted of nations and peoples who dishonor God will come to ruin (*see Prov. 14:34, Isa. 24:3-6*).

Isaiah 13–27 points to the end of the age-old conflict between truth and error, righteousness and evil. On Calvary, Christ resolved the conflict with a thoroughness that transcends time and encompasses eternity (*see 2 Cor. 5:20, 21; 1 Pet. 2:24*). In the corporate life of God's people, the conflict is resolved in the final work of the church militant as it undergoes purifying trials to become the church triumphant, victorious over sin through the power of the Cross. (See Ellen G. White, "A View of the Conflict," *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 41–47.) On a personal basis, the conflict is resolved through complete submission to Christ (*see Romans 6*).

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Proverbs 16:18, Luke 18:9-14, 2 Peter 1:5-8.*

- 1 In Thursday's study, we read that "sin carries the seeds of self-destruction." Pride also carries the same seeds. That is why pride is a sin. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (*Prov. 16:18, NRSV*). Discuss why pride is so terrible. What does Luke 18:9-14 teach us about pride?
- 2 Pride is fundamental to many other sins. When pride is sown, it reaps arrogance. Arrogance causes presumptuousness and complacency. Pride also reaps contempt for others, as well as suspicion, jealousy, covetousness, and discontent. If we are proud, we will reject wisdom. What is God's remedy to counteract the fruit of pride? *2 Pet. 1:5-8.*
- 3 Pride leads to self-deception and the conscious manipulation of others to preserve our position, especially when our position has to do with our role as a leader or otherwise influential person. Read Ellen G. White, "The Origin of Evil," in *The Great Controversy* (pp. 492–504). What does Ellen White say about the onset, resulting actions, and judgment of pride in the life of Lucifer, the first of the covering cherubs?
- 4 How can we avoid pride in our lives? What steps can we take to preserve ourselves against this invasive and often subtle sin? *Prov. 16:5, 6; 19:20; Col. 3:12; Phil. 2:5-8.*

WEDNESDAY May 5

Heaven's Gate *(Isaiah 13–14)*.

In Isaiah 14 a taunt against Satan, the fallen “Day Star [*in KJV*, “*Lucifer*”], son of Dawn” (*Isa. 14:12, NRSV*) is blended into a taunt against the king of Babylon. Why? Compare Revelation 12:1-9, where a dragon identified as Satan (*vs. 9*) tries to destroy a Child as soon as it is born. In verse 5 the Child clearly is Christ. But it was King Herod who tried to kill Jesus as a young child (*Matthew 2*). The dragon is both Satan and the Roman power represented by Herod, because Satan works through human agents. Similarly, he was the power behind the king of Babylon and the prince of Tyre.

Why does “Babylon” later refer to Rome (*1 Pet. 5:13*) and to an evil power in Revelation (*Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21*)?

Like literal Babylon, Rome and the Babylon of Revelation are proud, ruthless powers that oppress God’s people. See especially Revelation 17:6, for it is “drunk with the blood of the saints” (*NRSV*). They rebel against God, an idea implied in the name Babylon itself. In the Babylonian language, the name is *bab ili*, which means: “the gate of god(s),” referring to the place of access to the divine realm. Compare Genesis 11, where people built the Tower of Babel (Babylon) so that by their own power they could rise to the divine level of immunity from any accountability to God.

When Jacob awoke from a dream in which he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth, he exclaimed: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (*Gen. 28:17, NRSV*). Notice that the “house of God” is “the gate of heaven”; that is, the way of access to the divine realm. Jacob named the place Bethel, which means “house of God.”

The “gate of heaven” at Bethel and the “gate of god(s)” at Babylon were opposite ways to reach the divine realm. Jacob’s ladder originated in heaven, revealed from above by God. But Babylon, with its towers and ziggurat temples, was built by human beings from the ground up. These opposite ways represent contrasting paths to salvation: divinely initiated grace versus human works. All true religion is based on the humble Bethel model: “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (*Eph. 2:8, 9, NRSV*). All false “religion,” including legalism and “secular” humanism, is based on the proud Babylon model. For the contrast between the two approaches, see Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the publican (*Luke 18:9-14*).

Even after a few years in a Zen monastery, songwriter Leonard Cohen said, “I’m not saved.” In the context of today’s study, define his problem and solution.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

IV. God the Righteous Redeemer.

None would be reclaimed from his or her fallen state but for God's continuously extended mercy. The tension on earth is between former rebels who have repented through the grace of God and rebels who have refused to repent and who have become increasingly offended by divine offers of pardon and salvation. (See *Isa. 25:1-4, 26:1-13, 27:4-9, Eph. 2:1-8; compare 1 Pet. 4:1-4, 17-19.*)

Witnessing

Pride is a word with many meanings and emotions. We take pride in our country and all it represents. We take pride in our work accomplishments. We especially take pride in our denomination's growth and the way Christ's love is spreading around the globe. Pride can move us to tears, motivate us to do more, and bring satisfaction to our lives.

Pride can be good or bad.

This week, we studied the dangers of pride—pride that turns inward, that boasts of one's own accomplishments, that elevates humanness to the level of God and excludes Him from our gratefulness.

Such pride causes the fall of great nations. Isaiah introduces us to Babylon, whose world position seemed indestructible. Nevertheless, Scripture accurately predicted its downfall. Pride in its accomplishments placed Babylon beyond God's mercy and patience. Read Jeremiah 49:16 to your class.

When we focus on Jesus and give Him credit for leading us, we avoid destructive pride. "Praise to God and the Lamb will be in our hearts and on our lips; for pride and self-worship cannot flourish in the soul that keeps fresh in memory the scenes of Calvary."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 661.

Every morning, look in the mirror and repeat two words: "Remember Calvary." During the day, find ways to remind those around you to do the same. By the end of the first week, you will experience a difference in how you, and those you have touched in this way, perceive both the world around you and your Savior. Then destructive pride no longer will have a place in your lives.

THURSDAY May 6

Final Triumph of Zion (*Isaiah 24–27*).

Following oracles against individual nations in Isaiah 13–23, chapters 24–27 describe on a worldwide scale the climactic defeat of God’s enemies and the deliverance of His people.

Why does Isaiah’s description of the desolation of the earth (*Isaiah 24*) look like John’s description of events connected with 1,000 years that follow Christ’s second coming (*Revelation 20*)?

As in Isaiah 13–14, aspects of literal Babylon apply to later powers, and the “king of Babylon” represents fusion of human rulers with the mastermind behind them, Satan himself. So, a message that Babylon is fallen (*Isa. 21:9*) can be repeated at a later time (*Rev. 14:8, 18:2*), and Satan is finally destroyed after Christ’s second coming (*Rev. 20:10*). While the destruction of literal Babylon was a judgment “day of the Lord” (*Isa. 13:6, 9*), another “great and terrible day of the Lord” (*Joel 2:31, Mal. 4:5, compare Zeph. 1:7*) is on the way.

Similarly, in Isaiah 24 the prophet’s vision reaches through conditions with which he is familiar to the time when “the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” (*vs. 23, NRSV*). Isaiah undoubtedly thought the vision applied to the Jerusalem he knew, but the book of Revelation explains that it will actually be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem (*Rev. 21:2*): “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (*vs. 23, NRSV*).

Does God really destroy the wicked?

Look at Isaiah 28:21, where God’s work of destruction is His strange “deed” (*NRSV*). It is strange for Him, because He doesn’t want to do it, but it is, nevertheless, a deed, or an act. It is true that sin carries the seeds of self-destruction (*James 1:15*). But because God has ultimate power over life and death, and He determines the time, place, and manner of final destruction (*Revelation 20*), it is pointless to argue that He ultimately terminates the curse of sin in a passive way, by simply allowing cause and effect to take its natural course.

What we see in chapters 24–27 of Isaiah is what we see reflected in the entire Bible, which is, that in the end, no matter the suffering, pain, and desolation now, God and goodness will triumph over evil. What, then, is the only thing we can do if we, ourselves, want to be part of that final victory? *Prov. 3:5-7, Rom. 10:9.*

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Have you ever had to do something you really did not want to do? However, you bowed your head anyway and moved along with the unpleasant deed, because you knew it was *necessary* to do.

God often finds Himself in the same predicament, as we read in the lesson this week. Let us discuss a bit more why God finds it necessary to exact punishment.

Thought Questions:

❶ Why do good people suffer? Discuss.

❷ When suffering strikes us, we are inclined to ask, “Why me?” Perhaps a better question would be, “Why not me?” Discuss the following quote: “Can it be then that the suffering is part of our necessary education in our highly imperfect world? Is it the means that enables us to help one another toward the kingdom?” —Dorothy Minchin-Comm, *Glimpses of God*, (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), p. 371. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Application Questions:

❶ “All earthly powers are under the control of the Infinite One. To the mightiest ruler, to the most cruel oppressor, He says, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.’ Job 38:11. God’s power is constantly exercised to counteract the agencies of evil; He is ever at work among men, not for their destruction, but for their correction and preservation.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 694. Identify times you have faced life-altering personal suffering. Isolate the things in your life that brought you to that point. How did God support you during those times?

❷ Babylon is destroyed and God’s prophecies fulfilled. Scripture tells us that Babylon represents nations in the future who also will disregard His leading. The ruin of these nations also is predicted. We believe we are living in the last days of earth’s history. What are you doing to demonstrate your belief that the earth will soon end? Will your neighbors be able to turn to you when Jesus appears and say, “You prepared me for this event”?

FRIDAY *May 7*

Further Study: “Is it by conditions that we receive salvation? Never by conditions that we come to Christ. And if we come to Christ, then what is the condition? The condition is that by living faith we lay hold wholly and entirely upon the merits of the blood of a crucified and risen Saviour. When we do that, then we work the works of righteousness. But when God is calling the sinner in our world, and inviting him, there is no condition there; He draws by the invitation of Christ, and it is not, Now you have got to respond in order to come to God. The sinner comes, and as he comes and views Christ elevated upon that cross of Calvary, which God impresses upon his mind, there is a love beyond anything that is imagined that he has taken hold of.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 32.

Discussion Questions:

1 Look at the above quote from Ellen White; read it in the context of Wednesday’s study. What is she telling us there? Notice in her statement both elements of the Christian walk: faith and then works. How does she differentiate between them?

2 Why are pride and arrogance such dangerous sins? Why are they so hard to put away? Can it be because by their very nature they blind people to their need to put them away? After all, if you are proud, you think you are OK, and if you think you are OK, why bother changing? How can dwelling upon the Cross, and what it represents (the only means of saving any person), be a powerful cure for pride and arrogance in anyone?

3 Does Isaiah see hope for people of other nations? See, for example, *Isa. 25:3, 6; 26:9* (compare *Rev. 19:9*).

Summary: Isaiah saw that following Assyria, Babylon would conquer Judah. But he also saw that in spite of superhuman rulers of the darkness of this world (*Eph. 6:12*) working through God’s human enemies and presuming to play God, the Lord would decisively prevail and bring eternal peace to our troubled planet.