

Playing God



SABBATH—MAY 1

PRIDE AND IMAGINATION.¹ A pastor finished giving a sermon on pride. A woman who had heard the sermon told him she was very troubled. She also said she would like to confess² a great sin. The pastor asked her what the sin was.

She answered, “The sin of pride, for I sat for an hour in front of my mirror some days ago admiring my beauty.”

The pastor answered, “Oh, that was not a sin of pride. That was a sin of imagination!” (C. E. Macartney; adapted).

Sin was born in the heart of a mighty angel (Satan). Since then, pride has not respected the limits of real life for angels and for people. This problem is the worst with people who have spiritual pride. They are so blinded by sin that they believe they do not need a Savior.

This week, we will study how pride began.

A LOOK AT THIS WEEK’S LESSON: What will be the fate (future end) of Babylon? Why is sin punished so harshly? What caused Lucifer’s fall? What is the important difference between true religion and false religion? Does God really destroy wicked people?

MEMORY VERSE: “He is our God! We have put our trust in him, and he has rescued us. He is the Lord! We have put our trust in him, and now we are happy and joyful because he has saved us” (Isaiah 25:9, TEV).

¹imagination—what a person “invents” in his or her mind.

²confess—to say you have sinned.

SUNDAY—MAY 2

DOOM ON THE NATIONS (Isaiah 13).

Isaiah 13:1 says that Isaiah was the author (compare³ Isaiah 1:1; 2:1). Isaiah 13 seems to begin a new part of his book. Isaiah 13–23 are about a series of judgments against different nations.

Why do the prophecies against the nations begin with Babylon (Isaiah 13:1)?

Isaiah 10:5-34 already had announced judgment against Assyria. Assyria was the most dangerous nation in Isaiah's day. Isaiah 14:24-27 repeats God's plan to break Assyria. Isaiah 13–23 deal with the threat of other nations. Babylon was the most important nation.

Babylon was blessed with a rich cultural, religious, and political background. Babylon later became the superpower that conquered Judah. But during Isaiah's time, Babylon did not look as if it would threaten God's people. During much of Isaiah's ministry (work), Assyria was more powerful than Babylon. In 728 B.C., Tiglath-pileser III⁴ conquered Babylon and was made King of Babylon under the throne name "Pulu" (or "Pul"; read 2 Kings 15:19; 1 Chronicles 5:26). Since then, Assyrian kings conquered Babylon several times (710, 702, 689, 648 B.C.). But Babylon would later become the great superpower that would destroy Judah.

³compare—show how things are the same.

⁴Tiglath-pileser III—a strong king of Assyria.

⁵repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and that you want to stop sinning.

Read Isaiah 13. Notice how strong the language is. Why does a loving God let things happen? What does Isaiah 13 and all the verses in the Bible that talk about God's anger against evil tell us about the nature of evil? Jesus is speaking these warnings through Isaiah. He is the same Jesus who forgave, healed, begged, and warned sinners to repent.⁵ How do you understand this part of a loving God's character? How could this anger come from His love? How does Jesus' suffering on the cross help to answer these questions?

MONDAY—MAY 3

THE LATE GREAT CITY OF BABYLON (Isaiah 13:2-22).

In 626 B.C., Nabopolassar of Chaldea made himself king in Babylon. He began the Neo (New)-Babylonian kingdom. With Media's help, Nabopolassar defeated Assyria. His son, Nebuchadnezzar II, was the king who defeated Judah.

How did the city of Babylon finally end?

In 539 B.C., Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon for the Medo-Persian Empire (Daniel 5). Then Babylon lost its power forever. In 482 B.C., Xerxes I beat down a rebellion of Babylon against

Persian rule. He removed the statue of Marduk, Babylon's main god, and destroyed parts of Babylon's forts and temples.

Alexander the Great took Babylon from the Persians in 331 B.C. without a fight. Alexander dreamed about making Babylon his eastern capital. But Babylon lost its power over several hundreds of years. By A.D. 198, the Romans found Babylon completely empty. So the great Babylon came to an end through neglect. Today some Iraqi villagers live in parts of old Babylon.

The fall of Babylon described in Isaiah 13 frees God's people who have been under Babylon's control (Isaiah 14:1-3). The event⁶ that led to Babylon's fall was when Cyrus defeated the city in 539 B.C. Cyrus did not destroy Babylon. But this was the beginning of the end for Babylon. It never threatened God's people again.

Isaiah 13 shows the fall of Babylon as God's judgment. The soldiers who took the city were God's servants (Isaiah 13:2-5). The time of judgment is called "the day of the Lord" (Isaiah 13:6, 9). God's anger is so powerful that the stars, sun, moon, heavens, and earth even have a part in Babylon's fall (Isaiah 13:10, 13).

Compare Judges 5:4, where the song of Deborah and Barak describes how God is responsible for the quaking

of the earth and the rain from the heavens. Judges 5:20, 21 picture nature as fighting against the enemy.

Imagine someone reading Isaiah 13:19-22 when Babylon was at the peak of its power and glory. How foolish and impossible these verses would have seemed to the reader! What other unfulfilled prophecies seem "foolish and impossible" to us? Why would we be foolish to say they were impossible?

TUESDAY—MAY 4

FALL OF THE MOUNTAIN "KING" (Isaiah 14).

The fall of Babylon (Isaiah 13) frees God's people (Isaiah 14:1-3). Then Isaiah 14:4-23 makes a symbolic joke against the "king of Babylon" (read also Numbers 23:7; Micah 2:4; Habbakuk 2:6). Isaiah 14:4-23 is not meant to be real. It pictures dead kings greeting a new king who has just died (Isaiah 14:9, 10). Maggots and worms are the king's bedding (Isaiah 14:11). This is God's powerful way of telling the proud king that he shall be made humble, as other proud kings before him were made humble. Because this is a symbol, it does not explain the state of the dead!⁷

⁶event—something that happens.

⁷state of the dead—the Bible does not teach that people's souls continue to live after they die. Instead, they go into an unconscious sleep upon death, and are later awakened by Jesus during His second coming if they have accepted Him as Savior. Read John 11:11; Job 14:12-14; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, 10; Psalm 6:5; Psalm 115:17; Psalm 146:4.

How could Isaiah 14:12-14 be talking about a king of Babylon?

Babylonian kings were always proud (Daniel 4; Daniel 5). But even the most proud human king would not dare to “be like [the same as] the most High [God]” (Isaiah 14:14). While kings claimed strong connections with the gods, they were servants to them. For example, every year on the fifth day of the Babylonian New Year festival, the king was required to remove his royal sign before he approached the statue of Marduk, the main god of Babylon. In this way, his kingship could be “re-blessed.” The ideas of a human king trying to be better than even a lesser god would be crazy!

Ezekiel 28 also shows a ruler who wants to be like God. Here also, the description is about more than just a human king. In Ezekiel 28, the symbol becomes clearer. The proud king was in the Garden of Eden. He was a chosen guardian cherub (angel) on God’s holy mountain. He was perfect from the day he was created until sin was found in him. Then God threw him out. He will end up being destroyed with fire (Ezekiel 28:12-18). These details do not fit any human king. But Revelation 12:7-9 tells of a powerful angel who was thrown out of heaven with other angels. He is “Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:9), who deceived Eve in Eden (Genesis 3).

Satan has a proud imagination. Satan’s death will prove that he is not a

god. Jesus came forth from the grave. But Satan will die forever in the heart of a sea of fire (Revelation 20:10). He will never bother the universe again.

Contrast⁸ Isaiah 14:13, 14 with Philippians 2:5-8, Matthew 11:25-29, and John 13:1-5. What do these verses teach us about the difference between God’s character and Satan’s character? What does this difference tell us about how God views pride?

WEDNESDAY—MAY 5

HEAVEN’S GATE (Isaiah 13; Isaiah 14).

Isaiah 14:12 is a mocking remark (saying) against Satan, the fallen “Day Star (in KJV, “Lucifer”), Son of Dawn.” Why is this saying joined with another saying against the king of Babylon? In Revelation 12:1-9, a dragon known as Satan tries to destroy a child just being born. In Revelation 12:5, the Child is Jesus. But it was King Herod who tried to kill Jesus (Matthew 2). The dragon is both Satan and Herod. Satan works through humans. This is why Satan was pictured as the power behind the king of Babylon and prince of Tyre.

Why does Babylon later mean Rome (1 Peter 5:13) and an evil power in the book of Revelation (Revelation 14:8; Revelation 16:19; Revelation 17:5; Revelation 18:2, 10, 21)?

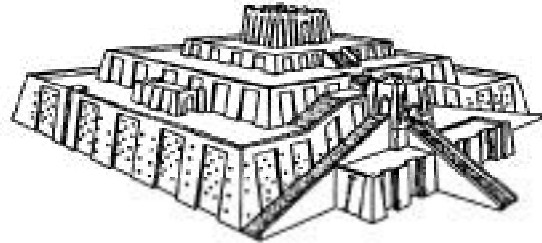
⁸contrast—show how things are different.

The same as real Babylon, Rome and the Babylon of Revelation are proud, ruthless (cruel) powers. They attack God's people. In Revelation 17:6, Rome is "drunk with the blood of the saints." They rebel against God. This idea is suggested in the name "Babylon" itself. In the Babylonian language, the name is *bab ili*. It means "the gate of god(s)." This name speaks of the entrance to the "heaven" of the gods. Compare Genesis 11, where people built the Tower of Babel (Babylon) so they could save themselves if there should ever be another flood that covered the whole earth.

Jacob awoke from a dream. In this dream, he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth. Jacob said: "It must be the house of God; it must be the gate that opens into heaven" (Genesis 28:17, TEV). The "house of God" is "the gate of heaven." This means the entrance into God's home. 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 of entering the home of God or gods. Jacob's ladder began in heaven, shown from above by God. But Babylon had its towers and ziggurat⁹ temples. Babylon was built by humans from the ground up.

Babylon's temples and Jacob's ladder show paths to salvation: God's grace versus human works. All true religion is based on the humble Bethel model (ex-

ample): "For by grace you have been saved through faith . . ." (Ephesians 2:8, 9). All false "religion" is based on the proud Babylon model. For the difference between the two methods, see Jesus' parable of the Pharisee¹⁰ and the publican¹¹ (Luke 18:9-14).



A ziggurat temple.

A Canadian song writer, Leonard Cohen, spent a few years in a Zen¹² temple. He told an interviewer, "I am not saved." Based on today's lesson, what do you think Cohen's problem was? What did he need to know about salvation?



Jacob's ladder is a symbol of the true gate to heaven and God's true salvation.

⁹ ziggurat—a temple built toward the sky like a pyramid.

¹⁰ Pharisee—a religious leader of Jesus' day who believed a person must keep God's law to be saved.

¹¹ publican—a tax collector. The Jews hated publicans because they collected taxes for the Romans who ruled over the Jews.

¹² Zen—an Eastern religion which teaches that a man named Buddha is the way to Nirvana (heaven). One reaches Nirvana through right thoughts; right understanding; right speech; right action; right livelihood (how we earn money); right awareness of our deeds, words, and thoughts; right effort and right meditation.

THURSDAY—MAY 6

**FINAL VICTORY OF ZION
(Isaiah 24–27).**

Isaiah 24–27 are prophecies against individual nations in Isaiah 13–23. Isaiah 24–27 describe the worldwide defeat of God’s enemies and the deliverance¹³ of His people.

Why is Isaiah’s description of the earth’s destruction (Isaiah 24) almost the same as John’s description of events connected with the 1,000 years after Jesus’ second coming (Revelation 20)?

As in Isaiah 13, 14, parts of real Babylon mean later powers. The “king of Babylon” means human rulers under Satan’s control. So the message, “Babylon is fallen” (Isaiah 21:9) can be used at a later time (Revelation 14:8; Revelation 18:2). Satan is finally destroyed after Jesus’ second coming (Revelation 20:10). The destruction of real Babylon was a judgment “day of the Lord” (Isaiah 13:6, 9). But another “great and terrible day of the Lord” is on the way (Joel 2:31; Malachi 4:5; compare Zephaniah 1:7).

In Isaiah 24, the prophet’s vision pictures what he knows well at the time of the vision: “The moon will grow dark, and the sun will no longer shine, for the Lord Almighty [God] will be king. He will rule in Jerusalem on Mount Zion” (Isaiah 24:23, TEV). No doubt,

¹³deliverance—rescuing; to make free.

Isaiah thought the vision meant the Jerusalem he knew. But the book of Revelation explains that this vision will be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2): “The city has no need of the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God shines on it, and the Lamb [Jesus] is its lamp” (Revelation 21:23, TEV).



Jesus is the lamp of the New Jerusalem.

Does God really destroy wicked people?

Isaiah 28:21 describes God’s work of destruction as His strange “deed [act].” It is strange for God to destroy because He does not want to destroy. Sin does carry the seeds of self-destruction (James 1:15). But God has full power over life and death. He describes the time, place, and manner (way) of final destruction (Revelation 20). For these reasons, we cannot argue that

God will finally stop the curse of sin by quietly letting things just fall apart.

What happens in Isaiah 24–27 is shown in the whole Bible. In the end, God and goodness will have victory over evil. What is the only thing we can do if we want to be part of that final victory? Proverbs 3:5-7; Romans 10:9.

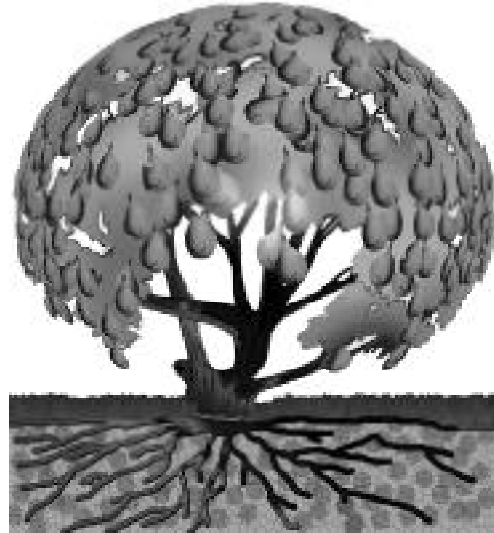
FRIDAY—MAY 7

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “Is it by conditions (works) that we receive salvation? No. It is never by conditions that we come to Jesus. Then how do we come to Jesus? We come to Jesus by living faith. We depend fully upon the saving blood of a crucified and risen Savior. When we do that, then we do the works of righteousness (holiness). But when God is calling and inviting the sinner there is no condition involved. God pulls the sinner closer by the invitation of Jesus. This does not require work. You need to answer (accept) in order to come to God. Then you as the sinner see Jesus high upon the cross. The Cross teaches us that God’s love is greater than any love you can think about.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 32.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is Ellen G. White telling us in the quote you just read? Notice

both parts of the Christian walk: faith and works. How does she show the difference between faith and works?



Faith is the root. Works is the fruit.

2. Why is pride such a dangerous sin? Why is pride so hard to put away? How can thinking about the Cross be a powerful cure for pride?
3. What hope does Isaiah see for people of other nations? Read Isaiah 25:3, 6 and Isaiah 26:9. Also read Revelation 19:9.

SUMMARY: Isaiah saw that after Assyria’s fall, Babylon would conquer Judah. Isaiah also saw that in spite of Satan’s control and efforts to play God, the Lord would succeed in bringing eternal¹⁴ peace to planet Earth.

¹⁴eternal—without beginning or end; lasting forever.