

Something to Sing About

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[0 : 00] Now, for our reading, we are coming again to the book of Isaiah, and this evening it's chapters 26 and 27, which you'll find on page 586.

This is bringing us to the end of the second great section of Isaiah, where he's been looking at the nations of the world, both of his own day and continuing indeed throughout the whole human history, and last week in 24 and 25, we saw how he turns from the specific nations to the whole world, indeed the whole created order, and in 26 and 27, he brings this to a culmination now.

So let's read these chapters. Chapter 26, verse 1. In that day, this song will be sung in the land of Judah. We have a strong city.

He sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. Open the gates that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. You keep him in perfect peace, whose mind has stayed on you, because he trusts in you.

Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock, for he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust, the foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy.

[1 : 29] Path of the righteous is level. You make level the way of the righteous. In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you. Your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul.

My soul yearns for you in the night. My spirit within, earnestly seek you, for when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness. In the land of uprightness, he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the Lord.

O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them. O Lord, you will ordain peace for us.

You have done for us all our works. O Lord, our God, other lords beside you have ruled over us. But your name alone we bring to remembrance.

[2 : 29] They are dead. They will not live. They are shaves. They will not arise. To that end, you have visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them.

But you have increased the nation, O Lord. You have increased the nation. You are glorified. You have enlarged all the borders of the land. O Lord, in distress they sought you.

They poured out a whispered prayer when your discipline was upon them. Like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth.

So were we because of you, O Lord. We were pregnant. We writhes. But we have given birth to wind. We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth.

And the inhabitants of the world have not fallen. Your dead shall live. Their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy. For your Jew is a Jew of light.

[3 : 26] And the earth will give birth to the dead. Come, my people. Enter your chambers and shut your doors behind you. Hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by.

For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity. And the earth will disclose the blood shed on it and will no more cover its slain.

In that day, the Lord, with his hard and great and strong sword, will punish Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, Leviathan, the twisting serpent.

And he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. In that day, a pleasant vineyard. Sing of it. I, the Lord, am its keeper. Every moment I water it, lest anyone punish it.

I keep it night and day. I have no wrath. Would that I had thorns and briars to battle. I would march against them. I would burn them up together. Or let them lay hold of my protection.

[4 : 27] Let them make peace with me. Let them make peace with me. In days to come, Jacob shall take root. Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

As he struck them, as he struck those who struck them. Or have they been slain as their slayers were slain? Measure by measure, by exile, you contended with them.

He removed them with his fierce breath in the day of the east wind. Therefore, by this, the guilt of Jacob will be atoned for. And this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin.

For he makes all the stones of the altar like chalk stones crushed to pieces. No asherim or incense altars will remain standing. Where the fortified city is solitary.

A habitation deserted and forsaken like the wilderness. There the calf grazes. There it lies down and strips its branches. When its boughs are dry, they are broken.

[5 : 30] Women come and make a fire of them. But this is a people without discernment. Therefore, he who has made them will not have compassion on them. He who formed them will show them no favor.

In that day, from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, the Lord will thresh out the grain. And you will be gleaned one by one. O people of Israel. And in that day, a great trumpet will be blown.

And those who are lost in the land of Assyria, and those who are driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain of Jerusalem.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, could you please have your Bibles open at these chapters we just read on page 586.

And we'll have a moment of prayer. Father, we pray indeed that the Holy Spirit who inspired these pages will bring them alive to us now.

[6 : 39] That the Spirit will take these words spoken long ago and apply them to our hearts today. And that you will indeed lead us beyond the sacred pledge to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Surely, one of the great gifts of God is music and song.

I'm not going to make any kind of comments about music. I know what I like, but I'm no expert. There's Ruth sitting there. I wouldn't dare. But the Bible is absolutely full of song.

It bursts into song over and over again. Because music and song embody something of the wonder of the gospel, of the wonder of the creator.

Indeed, the book of Job tells us that even as the world was created, the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy. And music tells us something, doesn't it, about the character of the people who produce it.

- [7 : 53] Spanish music, after all, does tend to suggest in our minds sunlit beaches, bammy breezes, and people enjoying themselves.
- Hebridean music, on the other hand, tends to suggest miss rolling in from the sea, bleak landscapes, and the like. And different musicians have different...
- My favorite musician, Elgar, is wonderful at evoking England's green and pleasant land. I know some of you Scots here will regard that as virtually heretical.
- Too bad. Now, the prophet, the poet Isaiah, is absolutely full of songs.
- We've seen some already. Last week we looked at two of them. And today we are finding the climax of the songs. Verse, chapter 26, verse 1. In that day, this song will be sung.
- [8 : 52] And then again in chapter 27, verse 2. In that day, a pleasant vineyard, sing of it. Singing about God's faithfulness, both in the present and of his coming reign in heaven and earth.
- Once again, we have the city of God and the city of the world and a worldwide vision. God will be God and the world will know it.
- Indeed, you could write that over much of Old Testament prophecy. The world will know that God is God. But the focus is rather different here. It's not just repetition.
- Last week we saw how these great songs evoke the new creation in all its wonder, in all its beauty. And in language of tremendous power and imagination, Isaiah is thrilling us with the thought of the world to come.
- Here, the emphasis is rather different. Isaiah is, as it were, saying, well, if this is true, what kind of lives are we to live in this world? That's what Peter does in his second letter.
- [9 : 56] In chapter 3, he has a vision of the new creation of God, bringing the world order to an end and introducing a new one. Then he says, what kind of people are we to be if all this is true?
- Far too many people read prophecy as a kind of roadmap for the future, trying to work out exactly what will happen and when it will happen. That's not the point of prophecy.
- Prophecy is to help us to live in this world as we wait for the kingdom to come. It seems to me the key here is chapter 26, verse 12.
- O Lord, you will ordain peace for us. You have done for us all our works. Perhaps in IV puts it more pointedly, All that we have accomplished, you have done for us.
- That's a wonderful thing, isn't it, to write over our personal lives, write over our church lives. In the last analysis, we cannot and must not take the credit for God's blessings.
- [11 : 03] After all, grace is what saves us. Grace is what keeps us. Grace is what will bring us safely home. Grace is something to sing about.
- And that's our title for this evening, something to sing about. And that's why it's so important. The songs we sing, the hymns we sing, have content and substance.
- And don't just always focus on our own concerns. Someone wrote a very interesting article on church music, which contained these words, Judging by an awful lot of church music, the Bride of Christ spends a great deal of time admiring herself in the mirror.
- Now, that's not something to sing about. That's why we discover, actually, that some people actually don't want to be converted. When they discover they have to sing, Worthy is the Lamb, when what they actually want to sing is, Worthy am I.
- Something to sing about. Very, very rich passage. And it has two elements. First of all, we have a prayer. And then we have a picture. In chapter 26, verse 1 to 27, And I think 27, belongs more naturally to 26.
- [12 : 21] Remember, the chapters are not inspired. They are far, far later than any of the texts of the Bible. This is a trusting prayer here in chapter 26 and into 27, verse 1.

And verses 1 and 2 are rather like the entrance liturgies, as they are called, you get in the Psalms, like Psalm 24, Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?

And who will stand in his holy place? It's rather like that. Notice, we did not create the city. He sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks.

26, verse 2. But it is there for us to enter, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. Notice this keeps faith.

It's not just the one-off act of faith by which we come to Christ. It is the daily faith. And there are a number of ideas here, I think, in this prayer. First of all, there is confidence, verses 3 to 6.

[13 : 27] You will keep him in perfect peace. Literally, you will keep him in peace, peace. And that's the way the Hebrew language expresses the superlative.

You remember back in chapter 6, it's a threefold, holy, holy, holy. There's Yahweh of hosts. And this follows on very well, I think, from what Paul was saying this morning, and he spoke about trusting faith, the trusting faith of Caleb in the book of Joshua.

Now notice what he is saying. You will keep him in perfect peace. Not you have to work yourself up by some psychological gymnastics so that you will always feel at peace.

This is the peace of Romans 5, being justified by faith. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. There are happy moments when the Lord allows us to feel something of that peace, to feel peace like a river, so to speak.

There are other times when it's very hard to hold on. We're holding on by our fingertips, as it were. The point is, this peace is the work of God, who is the everlasting rock.

[14 : 45] Verse 4, trust in the Lord forever. We can build on that rock. But that's a dynamic idea, not just a static one. Because the image really comes from Exodus 17, the rock from which living waters flowed.

See this wonderful idea, God is totally dependable. But he is always totally dependable. It's rather like these wonderful words you get in 1 Corinthians.

God is faithful. Absolute statement. Not God is sometimes faithful. Not even on the whole God is faithful, but without qualification, God is faithful to all eternity.

That's what Isaiah is saying. Unlike the false security of the world, which trembles to dust, which is the subject of verses 5 to 6, the city of the world, which trembles to dust, the foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy, the very people whom that the world city had neglected.

These are the people who enter the holy city and are blessed by God, who brings down the proud. So the first element in this trusting prayer is confidence.

[16 : 00] Then there is hope, the way of hope, verses 7 to 19. The path of the righteous is level. The way of life. And the language here echoes the book of Proverbs and Psalm 1, the way of life in which the righteous walk.

Level means that it, level doesn't mean it's all plain sailing. Level means he guides us infallibly through difficulties. He will not lead us astray.

Those who wait, and of course that occurs again in the great chapter, chapter 40, those who wait upon the Lord, those who hope in the Lord, will renew their strength, believing he'll complete what he has begun.

Hope in the Bible is not vain hope. It's not frantically hoping that things, everything will be just fine, that something will turn up.

Hope is the certainty, the assurance, that however difficult the journey may be, the destination is not in doubt. And verse 9, verse 8, first, Now remember soul in the Bible, it's not a disembodied entity within us.

[17 : 26] Soul is you and me. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, praise his holy name. So the soul is the individual self, and the spirit, which actively seeks God.

And in spite of this, the world around, and this will be, we'll particularly see this next week in chapter 28, the world around is blind to what God is doing.

God's work on behalf of his people. Verse 10, If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn to do righteousness. In the land of uprightness, he deals corruptly, and does not see the majesty of the Lord.

O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. It's wonderful when God does great things. One of the problems is, it's always easy to explain these things away.

A number of years ago, in the 1980s, there was a movement called Power Evangelism, associated with the late John Wimber. Wimber argued, that if there were more signs and wonders, if more people were healed, if more people had evil spirits cast out, and so on, that people would believe.

[18 : 41] The problem is, that is simply not true. People always have a way of explaining these things. Remember John 11, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

What would you expect to read? The chief priest went away and said, we've got this man all wrong. We better acknowledge him. We better see his Lord. No. They went away and plotted to kill him.

And it's so easy to explain. Now, by the way, I'm not denying that miracles happen. Of course I'm not. What I'm saying is, that we mustn't imagine, that there is another power of God, which is greater than the power of the gospel.

Remember, the gospel word is not accompanied by the power of God. The gospel word is the power of God to salvation. That's the thing we need to remember, particularly in times of barrenness and blindness, when people just do not see what is happening.

And, I mean, after all, in times of revival and times of awakening in the church, people are mocked and scorned it from the day of Pentecost on, where these men are drunk.

[19 : 50] And similarly, I mean, Wesley was criticized by a bishop. It's the most horrid thing, this pretending for supernatural power, and so on.

You see, God's work on behalf of his people will not always, perhaps not often, be recognized in this world. But, verse 12, O Lord, you will ordain peace for us.

There's a problem here, isn't there? If God is going to send his people into exile, if God is going to punish his people, how can we truly believe that God is God and the world will know it?

Now, the first thing, paradoxically enough, is it is because God is going to punish his people. See, if it was some external power other than God, who had been behind the exile, if it was some other force, then the question might well arise, can God deal with this?

Is he big enough? Can he handle these problems? But the point is, since God had to discipline his people, that brings hope, because God will keep his promises.

[21 : 07] And, verse 8, you have increased the nation, you have increased the nation, you are glorified, you've enlarged all the boundaries of the land. Well, that might have rung true in the days of Solomon, when the kingdom stretched from the Nile to the Euphrates.

What about now, when the kingdom is being reduced in size? When the northern kingdom is about to be taken away into exile? And this powerful metaphor of the pregnant woman, who, as she is giving birth, and then rejoices, because birth has come.

You see, the prophet is saying, that's not been our experience. We've had labor pains. What have they produced? They produce nothing. Verse 18, we were pregnant, we writhe, we have given birth to the wind.

We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth. And so often, doesn't this seem true of all our gospel work? That great story at the end of John's gospel, the disciples pushed out into the Lake of Galilee, they toiled all night, and they caught nothing.

And so often, we have to look at our labors and say, well, we've toiled all night. What have we got? We brought out the wind. We haven't brought salvation to the earth.

[22 : 25] But, the point, surely the answer is in verse 19. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy.

For your Jew is a Jew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. The resurrection hope. Now, in the immediate context, it is rather like what Ezekiel talks about in chapter 7 of his prophecy, the valley of dry bones, which the spirit brings to life, which in the immediate context is the, is the resurrection of the people after the death of the exile.

Because I said this in an earlier study, that when you're reading the prophets, you must remember those various levels of fulfillment. The prophecies of Isaiah, about the rebuilding of Jerusalem, about the resurrection of the people, they're partly fulfilled in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah.

And, of course, we looked at these books, an earlier stage in this year. But it wasn't the full promise, was it? And the day of Pentecost fulfilled even more, as thousands were swept into the kingdom.

But only in the new creation will we see the full result of it. That's surely why Paul says, at the end of that great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

[23 : 48] It's not actually producing wind. We have given birth to wind. We have given, and that word there is the word hebel, the word that Ecclesiastes uses, the futility, emptiness.

No, it's not going to be empty. Your labor is not in vain. Sometimes in this world, the Lord in his goodness gives us time of reaping. Sometimes in his graciousness, wonderful things happen.

Other times, for his sovereign purposes, he doesn't allow us to see the fruits of our labors. But the point is this, that one day it will all be seen.

One day, all the labor, all the gospel effort, will be seen to have been worth it. So, there is the way of hope. And then in, from verse 20 to 27, verse 1, believing that the kingdom will come.

Verse 21, the Lord is coming out from his place, believing that God's will will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven.

[24 : 54] Now, sometimes that seems a vain prayer, as we look around at the world, look at world history, the terrible things that happen. God will defeat all his enemies.

The picture in verse 20, is the picture taken from the Passover story, when God's people were told to shelter in their homes, and have the sign of the Passover blood, so that the destroying angel would spare them.

God will defeat his enemies on earth, to punish the inhabitants of the earth, for their iniquity. Verse 21, and the earth will disclose the blood shed in it.

Now, the light caught, you get at the end of the book of Revelation, in the great city of Babylon, the world city, where found the blood of all who had been killed, on the earth. But he'll not just rule on earth, he will rule in the heavenly places as well.

He will defeat his heavenly enemies, he will defeat the principalities and powers. Leviathan, here the ancient prince of hell, as Luther calls him, he will be punished with that great and strong sword.

[26 : 05] Leviathan, the book of Job, and some of the Psalms, the great sea monster, who is a picture of the devil himself, a picture of Satan, the ancient prince of hell.

And Luther also says, in that hymn, a word will quickly slay him. What is the great and sharp sword? That is the word of God, the word which brings salvation, creation, and judgment.

The removal of the curse, the new air and earth and sea. And this image of the evil in the sea is such a powerful one.

It gives a greater depth to that passage in Mark, when Jesus stills the storm. Who then is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him?

And to that passage, the end of the book of Revelation, the sea was no more. I don't believe that means there'll be no sea in the new creation. It means that they, it means there'll be no more evil.

[27 : 05] Evil will be banished. The sea is a place of beauty, but it's also a place of sorrow and destruction. Remember, Revelation also says, the sea gave up the dead, which was in it.

God will destroy all his enemies, his human enemies, and his supernatural enemies. That's the prayer then. Briefly, the song, the song of the vineyard, the fruitful vineyard.

You notice how in that day has been mentioned over and over again, punctuating the passage, the day of the Lord. Here's something else to sing about. And Isaiah, in some ways, could be called not just a tale of two cities, but a tale of two vineyards.

Back in chapter five, there was a spoiled and devastated vineyard. A vineyard that produced nothing but sour and tasteless grapes.

And notice it's the work of the Lord. I, the Lord, am its keeper. Now we are called to be laborers, to be workers in the vineyard. Well, we didn't create the vineyard, and we can't sustain it without the, without the Lord being there.

[28 : 15] Another picture of Eden. Another picture of the new creation. Just one or two things. First of all, this is a fruitful vineyard. Pleasant vineyard.

Every moment, I water it. Organic growth from heaven. Persistent and permanent care. Verse six, in days to come, Jacob shall take root.

Israel shall blossom and put forth, fill the whole world with fruit. Another picture of the whole earth being filled with, with God's people.

The whole evil gone. All the weeds of sin and trouble gone. The curse removed. And Eden, in fact, far more than Eden restored.

A new creation, which is everything Eden was. Far more, and far more permanent. And into that, we need to fit verses three and four.

[29 : 15] Anyone who attacks the vineyard, says the Lord, will be destroyed. Would I have thorns and briars? I would match, I would march against them. The Lord will not ultimately tolerate, those who destroy, his vineyard.

But at the same time, verse five, let them lay hold of my protection. End the repeated, let them make peace with me. You see, the vineyard, the sheepfold, the city of God is open to all who will come to it in repentance and faith.

That is the point, surely, of this. Just as at the end of the song, in chapter 25, Moab shall be trampled. But we know from, especially from the example of Ruth, that if Moab ceases to be Moab, it can become the people of God.

Oh, that the world might taste and see, sang Wesley, the riches of his grace. The arms of love that compass me might all mankind embrace. It is fruitful.

There is also a vineyard that becomes fruitful through being purified and pruned. And in verses, in verses seven to, verses seven to 11.

[30 : 31] Painful discipline. And Jesus uses this in John 16, doesn't he? Every branch that bears fruit. He prunes it so it will bear more fruit.

But the point of these verses is, has he struck them as he struck those who struck them? The oppressors, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, will all be destroyed.

But Israel will be, Israel will be disciplined. But that discipline is to remove their sinfulness and their impurity and bring them to the fullness that God had intended for them.

And that is verse nine. Therefore, by this, the guilt of Jacob will be atoned for. And this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin.

The exile was bitter. The exile was harsh. The exile was terrible. But it led to life, through death to life. And he makes, and the last part of that verse nine, when he makes all the stones of the altars, like chalk stones crushed to pieces, no asherim or incense altars.

[31 : 42] At the very beginning of the book, Isaiah has attacked, not so much false religion, not so much the worship of false gods, but the worshiping of the true God in a godless and unconcerned way.

And I think that's what he means by saying, all the stones of the altars will be crushed to pieces. No longer will there be a barrier between us. And then, of course, the asherim, the fertility goddess and incense altars, false religion will be gone, and the world city will be destroyed.

The fortified city is solitary. A habitation deserted and forsaken. There the calf grazes. It lies down and strips its branches. The world city is destroyed.

So there is fruitfulness. There is purifying and pruning. And then in the last two verses, verses 12 to 13, the image extends to the image of harvest.

Not just the grape harvest, but the grain harvest as well. Egypt, Assyria, Israel, and Israel. These are the limits of the known world of that time.

[32 : 55] And they're also going to be nations prominent in the next chapter in the historical background. That day, on that day, from the river Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, earth's wide bounds, from ocean's furthest coast, through cakes of pearl, streams, and the countless hosts.

Assyria is saying, all the people of God will be harvested. The harvest, the unparalleled harvest, will be seen in all its splendor.

As I say, nowadays, we are sometimes privileged to see part of that harvest. Individuals coming to Christ, churches growing, fellowships becoming more and more committed to the Lord and his work.

We see these things, we rejoice in them. But, we're also wrestling and struggling. We're also sinning and getting it wrong.

But in that day, all the people from every place, from every generation, will be gathered together. And the trumpet will sound. That goes back to the day of Jubilee, the day when the trumpet sounded to announce the year of Jubilee, which is the year of freeing of debts, and the year of liberation, back in Leviticus.

[34 : 11] And in the New Testament, this trumpet heralds the coming of the Lord. Paul, in Thessalonians, tells us that the Lord himself will come down from heaven with the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God.

So, all are united in worshiping God's city. Those who are driven out, those who are lost in Assyria, those who are driven to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

Isaiah is always shifting between Mount Zion and the whole world. He's localized, but he is universal in his perspective.

And, as I think I said last week, this is characteristic of prophecy. The holy city is not so much an entity in the new creation as the new creation under another, from another angle, another picture.

City, speaking of protection, and so on. And the whole world, yet open to the whole world, the heavenly city and Jerusalem, the gates are open day and night.

[35 : 18] Not that it needs walls to be defended, but shows the potential security. So, you see what Isaiah is saying? This is what's going to happen. This is what it will be like.

And because of that, we need to live our lives in the light of that. Since our path to glory cannot be thwarted, Isaiah is saying, live now in the light of then.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, how often we become discouraged and despondent. We mourn at the lack of harvest, at the lack of response.

And sometimes we're overexcited when some little things happen. And yet, Lord, teach us that in our joys and sorrows, in our successes and failures, in our ups and downs, that you are leading us towards that day, the day of the great harvest, and the whole earth will come to worship and help us to live our lives in that light.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.