

God's City is Secure

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[0 : 00] A couple of weeks ago we started a new series which I've called, let me remind myself what I've called it, God's Kingdom Will Come, some of the glimpses that the prophet Isaiah has of the coming kingdom.

And two weeks ago we looked at the great passage in chapter 2 about the mountain of the Lord. Today our reading is in chapter 4 which is on page 569, which I'm calling God's City is Secure. Now I want to read again the passage we read two weeks ago because they really go together. So if you turn back two pages please to 567 and we'll read verses 1 to 5 and then we'll read the passage for today.

So page 567, Isaiah chapter 2. The word that Isaiah the son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the lesser days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.

[1 : 21] For out of Zion shall go the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Then over the page to our reading for today, chapter 4, verse 2. Another vision of the coming kingdom.

Chapter 4, verse 2. In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.

And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy. Everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem. But the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of burning.

[2 : 34] Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night.

For over all the glory there will be a canopy, there will be a booth for shade by day from the heat and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Amen. May God bless to us that reading of his words. Now let's pray together. Lord God, in the midst of this world, in its turmoil and confusion, in the midst of our own lives so often perplexing and difficult, we look forward to the coming of the city of God, to the new Jerusalem, the city which exists now but which will one day be fully revealed.

As we listen to the words of the prophet, we realize they were not just spoken to his original hearers nearly 3,000 years ago, but they are spoken to us now, indeed, of a message to all the people of God as they continue their journey towards that city whose builder and architect is God.

So open our eyes, Lord, to your word. Open our hearts, and we pray that we may indeed be richly blessed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

[4 : 08] Now we all know that if you go to a jeweler's shop, very often particularly beautiful gems, pearls and so on, are set out against a black cushion in order that the gems may shine particularly brightly against the dark back cloth.

And that's what Isaiah the prophet is doing here. He's showing us the new Jerusalem, the city to come, against the black background of present-day Jerusalem.

You see, in chapter 1, he's told us what the Jerusalem of his day is like with its idolatry, its unbelief, its oppression, and the general unhappiness and rebellion in the city.

Then he's given us that vision we looked at two weeks ago about the mountain of the Lord, God's people gathering in Zion. Then after that, for the rest of chapter 2 and into chapter 3 and 4, he develops the idea of present-day Jerusalem, the Jerusalem which is full of unbelief.

And then the passage we've just read, once again, the beauty of Zion. So you see, these are, if you like, the bookends of the session. First of all, God's people gathering in Zion.

[5 : 24] And today I'm calling this God's city is secure. Now, how on earth is the change going to happen? That is the point. If it's like this, how is it going to become like that?

And the key to it is the phrase in chapter 4, verse 2, in that day. When the prophets use that phrase, they're looking forward to the kingdom that is to come, the time when God will establish his kingdom over all the earth.

And the city of pride and unbelief and oppression will change into the city of God when the kingdom comes. Now, we've got a whole tapestry of pictures here, rather kind of kaleidoscope.

The new Jerusalem and the transformed landscape around it. The important thing to realize is the new Jerusalem and the new creation are not separate things.

They're the same thing from a different angle. The new Jerusalem, the city of God, isn't an entity in the new creation. It's the new creation itself under a different angle.

[6 : 31] You see, the city suggests security. The city suggests stability. It suggests that a place where people can feel safe, where people can shelter.

On the other hand, the fuller picture, the picture of the new creation, suggests ever-expanding horizons, getting better and better and better.

So the question is, how are we going to get from where we are to where God is going to take us? And I want to make three observations about this.

First of all, from verse 2, In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious. The first thing I want to say is this is going to be brought about by the Messiah himself, God's servant.

It's not some pious hope that the world will get better and better and better, and that human beings will create the city by their own efforts. At the end of the 19th century, this was widely believed in Britain and in the other Western countries.

[7 : 35] Civilization was increasing. Living conditions were getting better. Scientific discoveries were being made. Surely the city of God is going to come soon.

Now, Darwin had argued that species gradually rise and get better, you know, from primitive life forms to more developed life forms.

And that came to be applied as a theory to the whole of society. Society is getting better. We are more upright, we are more intelligent, and so on. And we'll build the city by our own efforts.

There are many hymns of that time which talk about this. The city of God is not something that God makes, but we build it as we become kinder and gentler and more civilized.

Well, a century ago, that was disproved when the guns started to fire on the Western Front at the beginning of the Great War. And the most civilized nations in the West were engaged in the most deadly, bloodthirsty conflict that so far had afflicted society.

[8 : 47] Crazy thing is, some people still believe that. We're getting better and better and better. And we'll create it by our own efforts. But history is against us, isn't it?

This is not what happened then, and it's not what's going to happen now. So, the branch of the Lord. Now, the branch of the Lord is one of Isaiah's pictures from the Messiah himself.

In chapter 11, he talks about the shoot from the stump of Jesse, David's kingdom, and the Davidic king. And in chapter 6, he's going to talk about the holy seat, and so on.

So, in other words, this is going to be brought about not by human efforts, but by someone from outside. David's son, the branch, the holy seat, the one who is going to come.

In other words, it's a rescue mission from heaven. It's not a gradually improving situation on earth. That's why we know it's going to happen. But it's also a transformed land.

[9 : 46] Israel is the fruitful vineyard, and in chapter 5, Isaiah is going on to talk about how that vineyard became unproductive, how the grapes became sour grapes, if you like.

The vineyard is spoiled, and in our final study, in chapter 11 and 12, we'll look a bit more at the promised land, the anticipation of the new creation. But, the fruit here, this takes us back to a much earlier part of the Bible, to Genesis 49, where Jacob says, Joseph is a fruitful vow, a fruitful bow, but

he also brings blessing to others.

His branches run over the wall. So, in other words, this figure who is going to come, he's been anticipated in the past. People like Joseph, people like David, and others. And this happened partially when Jesus came the first time.

Later on, Isaiah is going to talk about the new creation and that the blind will see, the lame will walk, the deaf will hear. And, of course, that did happen when Jesus came the first time.

But it didn't happen universally. Three people were raised from the dead, but the cemeteries didn't empty. Many blind people were not healed, but these were anticipations of when the branch, when the Messiah, when the Son of David returns, has set up his kingdom.

[11:08] All these evil things will be gone. Deafness, lameness, blindness, and, of course, death itself. So, that's the first thing, then. This will be brought about by the Messiah himself.

And the prophet Zechariah actually used the phrase, the man called the branch, with all its suggestions of fruitfulness, of life, and of vigor. But secondly, in verses 3 and 4, how is he going to bring this about?

And he's going to bring it about by transforming lives. So, that's the second thing. The Messiah will transform lives. Verses 3 and 4.

He who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life. Now, this means, this, of course, is happening throughout history.

as people turn to the Messiah, as people turn from their sin and come to the Savior, this is happening. And, this is something that is certain.

[12:12] Because, notice, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, this is one of the many parts of the Bible where you get the mention of the book of life.

Those who have been chosen for a destiny of salvation. And, in particular, at the end of the book of Revelation, at the final judgment, the books are opened. And, another book is opened, which is the book of life.

This is what the Reformers call the perseverance of the saints. That is to say, you cannot be saved and lost again. Oh, you can get it wrong. You can stray.

But, Jesus said, I give to my sheep eternal life. They will never perish. No one will pluck them from my hands.

Eternally secure. Written in the Lamb's book of life. But, this is shown by a transformed life. In verse 4, the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion.

[13:11] Washed away the metaphor used in Scripture. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Not very good poetry, but very good theology.

Because, it's only in the cleansing power of the blood of the Lamb that people can be transformed. And, the fire of God here, which cleanses, is going to happen to the prophet in chapter 6, when the prophet says, I am a sinful man.

I live in the midst of sinful people. And, the seraph comes with the coal, which represents the Lord himself. And, he is cleansed and able to speak the message.

So, essentially, we have redeemed humanity. Safe and secure because their names are written in the book of life. But, showing that safety and security by the way they live.

And, remember always that people, people very often have perverted the doctrine of security and the doctrine of doing anything you like.

[14:14] This happened at the Reformation. It's happened often since. People, some people argue, since the Bible says, where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. Therefore, let sin spectacularly, so that grace can abound spectacularly.

Well, I don't know about you, but I find my own weakness and the diligence of Satan means that I sin quite enough without actually trying to have to invent other sins. So, there's the two sides to it. The eternal security but the living witness to that. The theologian, Jim Packer, said, the only proof of past salvation is present convertedness.

None of us remember the moment we were born. All of us know we are living. And this is the same with the new birth. So, the Messiah will bring this about. The Messiah will do that by transforming lives.

But, the third point in verses 5 to 6 is, the Messiah will create the place. The Messiah will create the new Jerusalem, the new creation.

[15 : 22] Then the Lord, verse 5, will create. That's the great word of the first creation in Genesis 1. The word only ever used of God, who brings life out of death and something out of nothing.

There is, there are other words used for create, form, shape, and make to use about human beings. But only God can create. Only God can create life and bring life out of the dead.

Now, the language here is very rich because the new Jerusalem is the completion of all God's gracious purposes. But, when that happens, it will be like the Exodus.

It refers here to the fire by night and the cloud by day. God brings his people home as he brought them out of Egypt through the desert at the first Exodus.

And the Exodus is a great picture in the Old Testament of salvation. Back in Luke chapter 9, when Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah on the holy mountain, Luke says, they spoke of his Exodus.

[16 : 25] That's the word that's used she would carry out at Jerusalem. What he was going to do in old Jerusalem was going to prepare the way for the journey to the new Jerusalem, leaving the shadowlands for the deeper country.

So, he is God the Savior. The Lord will create over this Mount Zion fire by night and cloud by day. And over this there will be a canopy.

Now, the word canopy actually means a marriage chamber. And the picture here is of the bride of the Lamb joined with the bridegroom, which is one of the pictures used at the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation.

See what it means? A whole load of rich pictures. The journey through the desert, the fire and the cloud showing the presence of God, the marriage of the Lamb and his bride in the new creation. The fire is awesome and terrifying. But the idea of the canopy, the marriage relationship is warm, secure, and promising so much more.

[17 : 32] It will be a place of complete protection. Verse 6, a booth for shade, for refuge, and a shelter. Deliberately doubling of words, every kind of protection. Shelter, shade by day, and the storm and rain.

The kind of thing that's said in the Psalms, for example, the sun will not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. In other words, this happens even in this world.

God protects us. But we know very well that we live in a fallen and dangerous world. There's tragedies happen, sad things happen, death happens. But that is part of the fallen world, the broken world, the present Jerusalem.

And it will not be true of the world to come. In the world to come, in the new Jerusalem, there will be no, there will be none of these extremes, the kind of extremes of temperature you get in this world, the kind of dangers and difficulties that mark our pilgrimage to the new city.

So, you see what I mean when I say the city is secure? Let me sum up just by making three very quick points here. First of all, this is something which is not a dream.

[18 : 44] This is something which helps us to live in this world. Now, if you're at all like me, you'll perhaps have certain photographs, certain things which you'll look at when you're depressed and it will remind you of the good things and the wonderful things that happen in life.

And so, the anticipations of the new Jerusalem which happen in this life both show us that it actually exists and that it will come. Secondly, we mustn't expect too much from the life in this world.

If we expect too much, we're going to be disillusioned and disappointed and people are going to be lulled into a kind of false security. We've got to read the small print like when you get these things I forever get on email about cheap rooms and hotels.

When you look at the small print you find it's at a time when it's impossible to go. The rooms are next to the kitchen and they're tiny and so on. Now, we must be realistic.

But thirdly, and this is important as well, we mustn't expect too little in this world. God is gracious. God is good. And we mustn't remember Martin, well, ex-Gornhillers will remember this, Martin Luther and his horse, the drunk falling off on one side and then falling off on the other.

[20 : 15] We mustn't because we say don't expect too much in this world. Go to the opposite extreme and say we expect nothing at all. God is good. God is gracious. Loving kindness endures forever.

And when we reach the city we will find not only that it fulfills our expectations but it far, far exceeds them. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord God, we praise you for the city of God, the city of which we are part and the city to which we are going. Give to us the faith that in the difficulties and dangers of this world we'll keep looking to

that city and traveling towards it.

And we thank you for those who have gone before us in the life of faith and for those who presently are with us and indeed for all those who will come in the future.

So help us, Lord, as we leave here and go back to our ordinary business. In Jesus' name. Amen.