

Another Tale of Two Cities

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[0 : 00] Now we come to our Bible reading and we're returning to the occasional series on the book of Isaiah. It began that last summer and various points throughout the year have looked at it and we've reached page 585, chapter 24 of the book.

And we're going to read chapters 24 and 25. Now, I hope you have on your seats one of these sheets, which is a kind of ladybird guide to the book of Isaiah.

No one will thank me for spending half an hour summarizing chapters 1 to 23. I'm not intending to do that, simply to point out where we've reached. If you look down towards the bottom of the sheet, I've tried to divide the book into five major sections.

And we're in section 2, chapters 13 to 27, which essentially is about God and the nations and indeed the whole universe. And chapter 24, we reach the point where Isaiah has been addressing specific nations.

Now he's talking about the whole world, indeed the whole created order. So we're going to read chapters 24 and 25, bearing that in mind.

[1 : 18] Chapter 24. Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.

And it shall be as with the people, so with the priest. As with the slave, so with his master. As with the maid, so with her mistress. As with the buyer, so with the seller.

As with the lender, so with the borrower. As with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered. For the Lord has spoken this word.

The earth mourns and withers. The world languishes and withers. The highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants. For they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth. And its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched. And few men are left. The wine mourns.

[2 : 26] The wine languishes. All the merry hearted sigh. Mirth of the tambourines is stilled. The noise of the jubilant has ceased. The mirth of the lyre is stilled.

No more do they drink wine with singing. Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it. The wasted city is broken down. Every house is shut up so that no one can enter.

There's an outcry in the streets for lack of wine. All joy has grown dark. The gladness of the earth is banished. Desolation is left in the city.

The gates are battered into ruins. But as it shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations as when an olive tree is beaten. As at the gleaning when the great harvest is done.

They lift up their voices. They sing for joy over the majesty of the Lord. They shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord. In the coastlands of the sea give glory to the name of the Lord.

[3 : 29] The God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise of glory to the righteous one. But I say I waste away.

I waste away. Woe is me for the traitors have betrayed. With betrayal the traitors have betrayed. Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth.

He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit. And he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened and the foundations of the earth tremble.

The earth is utterly broken. The earth is split apart. The earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man. It sways like a hut.

Its transgression lies heavy upon it. And it falls and will not rise again. On that day the Lord will punish the hosts of heaven in heaven and the kings of the earth on the earth.

[4 : 32] They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit. They will be shut up in a prison. And after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed.

For the Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. His glory will be before his elders. O Lord, you are my God.

I will exalt you. I will praise your name. For you have done wonderful things. Plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have made the city a heap.

The fortified city a ruin. The foreigner's palace is a city no more. It will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will glorify you. Cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

For you have been a stronghold to the poor. A stronghold to the needy in his distress. A strength from the storm. And a shade from the heat. And the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall.

[5 : 32] Like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners. As heat by the shade of a cloud. Till the song of the ruthless is put down. On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food.

A feast of well-aged wine. Of rich food full of marrow. Of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain. The covering that is cast over all peoples.

The veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.

And the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him.

That he might save us. This is the Lord. We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

[6 : 36] And Moab shall be trampled down in his place. As straw is trampled down in a downhill. And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it.

As a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim. But the Lord will lay low his pompous pride. Together with the skill of his hands. And the high fortifications of his wall.

He will bring down, lay low and cast to the ground. To the dust. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to our hearts and our minds.

Now, could I ask you please to have your Bibles open at page 585. And we'll have a moment of prayer. Father, your word speaks to us in many ways, in many voices.

And we pray, Lord, that as we open that word now, that you will take my human words, and all their imperfections, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

[7 : 48] And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen. Now, at this time of year, there are innumerable articles in magazines and newspapers and online giving predictions for what the year is going to hold.

One or two titles. Seven MPs to watch out for. Not to watch out for because they were likely to be deceptive. To watch out for because they were likely to make an impact.

Six predictions about the economy. These kind of predictions, which every year at this time are made.

And you can be certain of one thing above everything else. If any of these predictions are fulfilled, the writer of the article will be very quick to remind us that you read it first here.

And if none of them are fulfilled, then the writers of the same article will probably keep it from us and pretend they never wrote them. Because human beings cannot predict the future.

[9 : 08] Because events are always overtaking us. Former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was asked, what's the most difficult thing about being Prime Minister? And he replied, events, dear boy, events.

Now, we know that's true in our own lives. Circumstances over which we have no control. And therefore, although these predictions may be interesting, and though occasionally they may score a bullseye, for most of the time they are simply speculation.

Now, what we have in this passage we read is an absolutely certain prediction of what is going to happen. Isaiah is not a political columnist.

He's not a foreign correspondent. He's saying, this is going to happen, and it's going to happen because the Lord has decided it will happen. The Lord has spoken the word, and because he has

spoken the word, it will happen.

And the phrase we've often noticed in Isaiah occurs again, on that day. And that day is the final day, the final day when all the provisional verdicts will be set aside, when history will come to a close, and the kingdom will be established.

[10:23] Now, there's two notes struck here in these chapters. First of all, the earth is shaken in judgment. That's mainly, but not entirely, chapter 24.

And the earth is blessed by salvation. Mainly chapter 25. These are going to be our two main points tonight. The earth shaken in judgment, and the earth blessed in salvation.

This is a tremendous poem. Picture piled upon picture. Or to use another metaphor, this is a great symphony. Isaiah has been described as the great symphony of salvation.

The various notes, the blending together to create this. I like what the poet Blake said. When you see the sunrise, do you see a golden disc like a coin?

Or do you see a multitude of the heavenly hosts calling, holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty? As Isaiah looked into the future, and as he talked about the effect of the future in the present, he saw the equivalent of a multitude of the heavenly hosts singing, holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty.

[11:35] That's the first thing. The two notes, judgment and salvation. The second thing is the whole earth, and indeed it's wider than the earth, because this is the whole universe, the sky, the world, and the underworld, and so on, are symbolized by two cities.

There is the wasted city of 2410. The wasted city is broken down. Verse 12, desolation is left in the city. And then there is Zion, the city of our God, 25-6 on this mountain.

That is the mountain of Zion. And indeed, it's the story of the world. That's why our title tonight is A Tale of Two Cities. That's what biblical history is about.

The city of the world, symbolized by Babylon, and the city of God, symbolized by Zion. Now, it's not just the two literal cities.

It's what John calls the world, which passes away, and the people of God, the city of God. That's what we're going to be looking at the next moment.

[12:43] But first of all then, the earth shaken in judgment. You'll notice the agent is the Lord himself. Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate.

Verse 1 and then verse 3, The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered, for the Lord has spoken this word. Just as in the creation story, God spoke, and there was light and life.

And so in judgment, he speaks once again, symbolized in the book of Revelation by the sharp sword that comes out of his mouth. His purpose is nothing less than the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

This is what Isaiah is about. So two things here. First of all, the total destruction of evil. Now, I'm not going to go into this chapter in detail.

There's a tremendous amount in it. It's worth studying. And I already recommended late Alec Matier's daily devotional guide to Isaiah.

[13:50] Is it in the book room, Ag? Good. It's in the book room, thanks. So you can get it there. And it's a series of readings. Alec Matier spent a lifetime on Isaiah. We've got the Digest here.

Also one on the Psalms. These were the last two books he wrote before he went to be with the Lord a month or two ago, the age of 91. Paul was talking this morning about Joshua being old and advanced in years and still had worked to do well.

Matier was writing up to the age of 91. So that's good. Wonderful. So there will be a total destruction of evil. Would you like to live in a world without war, without terrorism, without illness, without oppression, without poverty, and above all, without death?

The answer to that is obvious. That is the kind of world we all want to live in. And we know perfectly well that is not the kind of world we live in now. And therefore, these things have to be removed.

They have to be judged before that world can come. The removal of the curse, verse 6, therefore a curse devours the earth. That takes us back to the beginning of our Bibles, Genesis 3, the Lord spikes the earth, indeed the universe, with a curse because of the sinfulness of humanity.

[15:09] And notice how at the beginning of the chapter, verse 2, all of society, all classes of society are involved, the people, the priests, the buyer, the seller, the creditor, and the debtor.

Every section of society is involved. Just as in the awesome picture at the end of Revelation of the great white throne, John says, I saw the dead, great and small, stand before God.

No one's too important to be there. No one is too insignificant to be there. And so it is here. And why is this happening? Because verse 5, they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.

Everlasting covenant was the creation of the world by God to be the theater of his glory. And after the flood, he renews that covenant with Noah.

And that's very important. God intends to create a new heaven and a new earth. And all pleasure is gone. Now, it's very interesting here.

[16:19] Many of the things which are said not to be there any longer are also things which appear on Mount Zion in the positive picture of salvation. The Bible does not talk about disembodied existence in a shadow land.

We are in the shadow land at the moment. And when we think of the world to come, we must take all the different pictures the Bible has. We still often tend to think of it simply as endless singing. Well, thank you very much. I think even the Hallelujah chorus would wear thin after a hundred years. None of us want an eternity sitting on clouds and strumming harps.

That's only one picture. Of course, there will be praise in the new creation. But then there's other pictures as well and we'll look at that in chapter 25 and in other chapters later on.

And you'll notice as well in verse 19, sorry, verse 18 first of all, the windows of heaven are open, the foundations of the earth tremble.

[17:29] This is imagery drawn from the flood story in Genesis. That's exactly what Peter says in his second letter, that when the final judgment comes, it would be like the flood.

people just be behaving as normal. And then the final judgment comes. Peter said, where is this coming that he promised?

Well, Peter says, when he comes to judge, it will be known. There's one little other detail I want you to notice in verse 10. The wasted city is broken down.

This word wasted is the word that's used in Genesis 1, verse 2 of the desolation that hovered over the earth before God spoke the great creating word, let there be light and brought light and order and beauty and life into the world.

The hint here surely is that just as in Genesis at the beginning when he created the heavens and earth, he's going to do exactly the same again at the end. There will be a new creation.

[18:31] Total destruction of evil, which is necessary for that good creation to happen. You can't have the good creation when death reigns, when terrorism flourishes, when hopelessness and depression and all the other things are there.

So the total destruction of evil. The other thing I want you to notice in the chapter, I'm sure you notice this as we're reading it, the apparent incongruity of verses 14 to 16.

There's all this and then suddenly breaking into song, they lift up their voices, they sing for joy.

You'll notice this, first of all, it's a worldwide song. Shout from the west in the east, the coastlands of the sea, the coastlands or islands, the favorite word of Isaiah, as he begins, the prophets begin to look westward as they see the work of God is going to flourish in the lands of the Mediterranean. That is exactly where, of course, the New Testament is going to take us. Now, what is the point of this? Praise anticipates the new creation.

When God's people sing his praises on earth, it's a statement of faith. When we, I mean, when we sing at the end of the service, Christ is surely coming, bringing his reward.

[19:53] It doesn't look any evidence of that in the world today, is there? It's a statement of faith, an anticipating of the new creation. It's said that during the Civil War of the 17th century when Cromwell's Ironsides raised their sands, the Cavaliers tremble.

I don't think it's fanciful to imagine the principalities and powers of that dark empire tremble when they hear the triumph of Jesus celebrated. Why Satan hates it?

Read Revelation 12 and 13. He is furious, he is cast down to the earth because Christ has won and Christ will win at the end and he will subdue all his enemies, verse 21, the enemies in heaven, the principalities and powers, Satan himself, enemies on earth and he will reign.

The moon will be confounded, the sun ashamed for the Lord of hosts reigns. A poetic, a poetic description of the glory of the new creation and notice the end of the verse, his glory will be before his elders, the elders representing all of God's people.

As they do in Revelation where we have the thrones of the elders before the throne of God. All the people of God. That brings a transition to chapter 25.

[21 : 15] The earth shaken in judgment, totally shaken, evil banished, evil banished, Satan defeated and the reign of death and sin ended.

That brings us on to chapter 25. The earth blessed by salvation, a song of praise. Now, this isn't just an intellectual idea, is it?

Because, after all, we have to ask ourselves, can God deliver on his promises? Because the promises are so wonderful, so breathtaking, so extravagant even.

Has he promised things he can't deliver? And this is what this chapter is answering. First of all, what kind of a God is he? Is he a God who is able to subdue everything and bring about his kingdom?

Well, first of all, verses 1 to 5, he is a God of surprises. You have done wonderful things. a deliberate echo of the song of Moses in Exodus 15.

[22 : 24] You, I will exalt you, I will praise your name. And when you study the hymns and songs of the Bible, you often find this deeply personal on Isaiah's part, but also echoing the great words of the past as well.

Just as in the song of Mary that we sang, tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord, the magnificat in Luke 2. Mary is deeply personal in her feelings, which is also echoing the words of the Old Testament prophets.

And you know, it's so important. One of the things, I'm so often struck by the thinness and poverty of my language, and that's where we need to draw on the resources of the church in the past and in the present.

In the case of either the past or the present, there was good things written in the past, there was rubbish written in the past, just as much as now. But, you're joining, if you like, with the saints throughout the ages, and not least, of course, above all, with the sounds themselves, and other prayers and songs that have been written and are still being written.

See, it's new, but it's consistent with his age-old purpose. And that's the wonderful thing about God. God is totally consistent, and yet, he is always new.

[23 : 51] A new commandment, as Jesus talks about, and yet, it's not a new commandment, it's the old commandment. It comes with freshness and power. Sing a new song to the Lord, as the psalms say.

Not a new song in the sense we've invented a new God, but that the power and wonder of this God has become real to us. So, when the city of the world goes, what will happen?

You have been a stronghold to the poor, stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm, a shade from the heat, from the breath of the ruthless. This is God.

This is the kind of God he is. He isn't just power, he is tenderness as well. That is the characteristic of the God of Scripture, isn't it? You get some, in most pagan religions, the gods are either all-powerful or else they are totally fickle and untrustworthy.

No. This God gives salvation to the poor, to the weak, and to the needy. Who are the poor, the weak, and the needy? All of us. Because we all are poor without the gospel.

[25 : 03] We all are weak in ourselves. We are all needy. So, first of all, he is a God of the surprises. Secondly, he is a generous host. Verses 6 to 8.

There's another picture of the new creation. A marvelous party, a banquet with no expense spared. And that's developed elsewhere in Scripture.

I used to speak about this in chapter 55. Come and wine and milk without money and without price. And Jesus is to tell many parables of the great banquet on Mount Zion.

Now, Mount Zion here is not just the hill on which Jerusalem stands. It's the whole earth. Rather, as at the end of the Bible, the holy city coming down out from God, from heaven, is not an entity, if you like, in the new creation.

It's the new creation itself from a different angle. And we mustn't be super spiritual and explain away these words as meaning we'll all be full of joy.

[26 : 10] You know, it's rather kind of ridiculous thing that some liberals say about the parables. Jesus did not turn water into wine. He made everybody feel so glad and so joyful that they thought the water tasted like good wine.

Now, frankly, that is not the gospel. That is sentimentality. We are Jesus who makes us feel good. So we go, we make others feel good. Or rather like, I've heard it said, you know, when Jesus fed the 5,000, a little boy brought his picnic lunch.

Now, boys and girls, are you going to give your lunch to Jesus? I remember when I heard that as a boy, I thought that was ridiculous. Did the one who created out of nothing need my picnic basket? That's surely not the point of the story. The point of the story is rather that however little we have, God can make it into a feast. Good food, good drink, great company, wonderful. Not, as I say, disembodied existence in the shadow land, but a new creation. And notice verse 8, he will swallow up death forever.

[27 : 25] Now, in the Canaanite religion, which often proved such a great temptation to the Jewish people, and was fought against particularly by the prophet Elijah, there was a God called Moth, who was the swallower, whose jaws stretched from heaven to earth and swallowed up everything that came into his devouring jaws.

Here, the swallower will be swallowed. Paul says, death is swallowed up in victory. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Death is ruthless. Death is indiscriminate. Death respects no one and nothing. But I want you particularly to notice the second part of verse 8.

The Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. In the middle of Revelation, John picks up this phrase. Notice exactly what it says. it doesn't say no one will cry anymore.

It says he will wipe away tears from all faces. The tenderness of the Lord. The personal touch. And I think this is so wonderful.

[28 : 37] And the reproach I imagine here, reproach of his people, is the sinfulness of his people, which has caused such a stumbling block often. As you know, very often we ourselves can be a great stumbling block to the gospel because we're not very good examples of it.

Well, that will be taken away. He is a God of surprises. He is an utterly generous host. And no expense spared.

Of course, that has a much deeper meaning. No expense was spared. The expense was the blood of Jesus, was it not? And finally, verses 9 to 12, he will complete his work.

it will be said on that day. You see, we often pray, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

I wonder if we really believe that's going to happen. Isaiah says it is going to happen. They said, we have waited for him. In the great 40th chapter, he's going to say, those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength.

[29 : 50] Paul is to talk about those who love the Lord's appearing. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. That's a word for now, but as I say, this is anticipating victory.

The hymn we often sing says, when the road is steep, the road is long, steals on our ear the distant triumph song. And that's anticipating that. But on that day, the whole universe will burst into joy.

Some of the sounds express them, 98, the rivers will clap their hands, the trees of the field will rejoice, and the whole of creation will be what God intended it to be.

But there's a dark side to judgment represented here by Moab, one of the petty kingdoms who is a continual thorn in the flesh to Israel. Proud and rebellious Moab, that will be laid low.

But the city of God is secure while the city of the world is destroyed. Does that mean there's no hope for Moab? Does that mean if you're a Moabite, you are completely cut off from the kingdom of God?

[30 : 59] Think about that bright name that resounds down the scripture, Ruth. Who was Ruth? She was a Moabite, was she not? And she appears in the New Testament, in the first chapter of Matthew, as the ancestress of David himself.

Moab can be saved, but Moab can only be saved if it turns in repentance and humility to Israel's God. There is hope for the whole world if the whole world will come repentance and faith.

God's city remains. God's city will stand. And remember, of course, God's city is not just something that's going to happen in the future.

It's there already. Long, long ago. What did Abraham do? He set out in faith, looking, as the letter to Hebrews says, for a city which has foundations, whose builder and architect is God.

Whereas the city was already there when Abraham travelled towards it. It will only be fully revealed at the end of the story. prophet Isaiah is saying, is he not?

[32 : 10] God will be God and the world will know it. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, it's so difficult sometimes in the troubles and frankly in the grey, dull days of our lives to keep our eye on this, the holy city.

We pray indeed that you will give to us faith and courage and vision, the faith that our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love.

We pray indeed that that may brighten the journey and may give us cause even in this world to anticipate that day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. For the glory of your name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.. Amen.

[33 : 32] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.