

“Kept in Perfect Peace”

Isaiah 26:1-6

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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.*

²*Open the gates,
that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in.*

³*You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.*

⁴*Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.*

⁵*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.*

⁶*The foot tramples it,
the feet of the poor,
the steps of the needy.”*

- Isaiah 26:1-6, ESV

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” So goes Charls Dickens’ famous opening line to his best-selling book, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Here in Isaiah 26, as in so much of Scripture, we’re presented with a tale of two cities – the strong city and the lofty city - each of which longs for peace, but only one of which actually finds it.

I. The Universal Desire for Peace

All people everywhere and at all times desire peace. Every year at Christmas time, we hear the most common wish of people: Peace on Earth. In 1955, Sy Miller and Jill Jackson wrote a song that’s become a popular holiday anthem for many years: “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” This song has resonated with so many people because the state of our world makes us long for peace on earth and the state of our heart and mind makes us long for that peace to begin within us.

We have pictured for us in Isaiah 26 a song about two cities, the strong city we have been given by God and the lofty city of the world. The song is introduced by this opening line – *“In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah”*

What is “that day”? It’s the day of salvation, the day the Lord acts decisively to redeem His people and establish this strong city for them, not the earthly city of Jerusalem, but the heavenly New Jerusalem. “That day” began when Jesus Christ took our sins upon Himself, clearing our debt and God’s judgment against us, when He rose again to conquer death and hell forever, and when He poured out the Holy Spirit to come and live inside every believer as our Helper and the down-payment on our eternal inheritance, kept in heaven for us. “That day” has continued since those decisive salvation events and will continue until the day when all believers will be gathered together into the New Heavens and the New Earth as the strong holy city, New Jerusalem, in its perfected and glorified form.

The lofty city of the world was founded when Adam and Eve decided they could have a better life apart from God than they could have in the Garden of Eden under the loving rule of God. When Adam and Eve trusted a serpent instead the God who made them and knew them, they decided they knew better than God how to provide for themselves. Later the first human city was established by Cain, who had killed his brother, Abel. He named the city in honor of his son, Enoch. This is the history and heritage of the lofty city, the city of man exalting himself.

II. **The Lofty City: Pretended Safety**

The lofty city pretends to be safe and secure. People who desire world peace sometimes look back in history on the era of the Pax Romana as a Golden Age of human peace, when no major wars engulfed human civilization around the Mediterranean Sea for 200 years. Jesus was born during the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace, which lasted from 27 BC until around 180 AD. However, Rome was constantly fighting on its borders, and the Roman society of this time was built on tyrannical oppression in the name of the glory of Rome. Subjugated peoples were often enslaved, and the Roman Empire had millions of slaves. Women were exploited and abused as Temple prostitutes for various pagan gods. Human life was not held in high regard, as hundreds of thousands of people were killed in gladiatorial games, deadly chariot races, historical re-enactments of great Roman battles that included actually killing people. Historians estimate the Roman Empire may have killed 2-3 million people for the entertainment of the masses, and the masses crowded in by the tens of thousands to watch these bloody spectacles.

So, is that really peace? Is that really a Golden Age of humanity?

The more you study human history, the more you will understand why Isaiah 26:5-6 so strongly

condemns the lofty city –

⁵ *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.
⁶ The foot tramples it,
the feet of the poor,
the steps of the needy.”*

As Psalm 49 tells us twice (in verses 12 and 20): “*Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.*” The lofty city is, in the end, a bestial city of cruelty, arrogance, greed, and exploitation. It deserves and receives God’s judgment.

III. **Our City: Security and Peace**

We have been given a much better city, a strong city. We did not build it. Hebrews tells us, “*Its architect and builder is God.*” Hebrews 11 tells us of Abraham that he went out from his father’s house and lived in tents as a nomad because “*was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*” This is the strong city described in this salvation song in Isaiah 26:

*“We have a strong city;
he sets up salvation
as walls and bulwarks.
² Open the gates,
that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in.
³ You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.
⁴ Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.*

Notice the confident and definitive indicative statement: “We have a strong city.” The song is not “We’re building a strong city” or “We hope one day to create a strong city.” No, we already have this strong city. The next three little words “He sets up” tell us that God is indeed the designer and builder of this city.

Three features of this city are highlighted here in these verses:

1. The walls and bulwarks of the city are salvation.
2. The gates of the city are open are only to the righteous nation that keeps faith.
3. Inside the city is an everlasting and absolutely trustworthy rock, and God keeps in perfect peace the residents of the city who stay their minds on Him, hiding themselves in the Rock.

We're going to explore these three aspects of the strong City of God, but before we do, I want to make sure we have something very clear. I don't want to miss the important and obvious truth here, so I'm going to ask you a series of questions, and I would like you to all answer together, in confident unison:

1. Who is our salvation? [Jesus!]
2. Who is the gate or the door? [Jesus!]
3. Who is the everlasting rock of ages, the rock of our salvation? [Jesus!]

Jesus is the strength, the access, and the peaceful refuge of the strong city of God. And so, this song is celebrating what it means to belong to Jesus and His people, His body, His flock, His city. We are His and He is ours. The point of the strong city is to teach us what it means to belong to Jesus, to be in Jesus, to have a refuge of peace in Jesus and Jesus alone!

A. Walls of Salvation

So, first, the walls and bulwarks of salvation. God didn't want us to miss the fact that Jesus is our salvation, and so Jesus means salvation. And so, the word translated "salvation" here at the end of Isaiah 26:1 is *YeShua*, the Hebrew name of Jesus.

The strength and defense of the city of God is not in our size, our popularity, our social media influence, our political clout, our intelligent defense of the Gospel, or any other measurable human factor. The walls and bulwarks of the holy city are Jesus Himself, and His finished work of salvation. If you are in the city of God, surrounded by the walls of the salvation of Jesus, you are secure.

Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life to earn, to fulfill a perfect righteousness for us. He died in our place on the cross to take all our sin on Himself, to cleanse us of our sin and to satisfy the just wrath of God. He rose again and defeated death and Hades forever. As our victorious risen Lord, He now holds the keys of death and Hades, and no one can snatch those keys away from Him or take His dearly loved sheep out of His hands. The work of salvation is finished, and we are secure in Jesus, if we belong to Him. We do not need to live in fear. The walls of God's city will hold. They

will not be shaken.

B. Gates Open for the Righteous

How do we get into the city and into this secure place? Well, you enter a city by its gate. Here, we are told that the gates of God's city are open so that *"that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in."* This might scare you at first into thinking you're not worthy because you're not righteous and you don't keep faith with God. In fact, if you know your own heart, you'll know you are quite faithless.

But perhaps this line doesn't actually mean what you think it means on a first read. How are we made righteous before God? Not because of any righteousness of our own that we have in ourselves, but only because of the righteousness of Jesus, imputed to us by grace and received by faith. In other words, this line is telling us that only those made righteous by saving faith may enter the city of God.

In John 10, Jesus told us this about Himself –

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. – John 10:1-9, ESV

Jesus is the door to God's good keeping. Whoever enters by Him will be saved. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-30 –

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

If you want the true and eternal security of being in God's city surrounded by the walls of salvation, the only way to enter is by faith in Jesus. Enter by Jesus. Trust in Jesus. He is both the strong walls that surround us and keep us in God's city and our access to enter the strong city.

C. Kept in Perfect Peace

Once we are in the city, having trusted in Jesus and being kept by His salvation, we can then experience peace –

³*You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.*

⁴*Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.*

These verses carry a message only for those who are in the city. Here's the truth behind these verses: Many have entered into and are secure in the strong city, but they don't have peace. They may have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, but they don't experience the perfect peace promised here in verse 3. Why not? How can you be perfectly secure and not have perfect peace?

Well, we sometimes refer to the true city of God, the people surrounded by the walls of salvation, as the invisible church. And if we stick with this imagery of the strong city, we can understand that as this city exists in the midst of a fallen and hostile world, its walls are strong and absolutely secure, but they are invisible. This means, among other things, that many people who are safe inside the walls feel insecure because they see the hostile, God-hating world all around them and they feel weak, vulnerable, and anxious.

It also means there are many people just outside the strong, holy city who think they are in the city. Perhaps they hear the Gospel being proclaimed and the praises of God being sung from inside the city walls, and they're so close and can hear everything so clearly, they think they're inside the walls of salvation when really, they're outside.

Well, how can those who are near the city and hear the preaching and the singing know for sure whether they're in the city or just outside the walls? By trusting in Jesus. Jesus is the city gate, and if you actively trust in Him alone for salvation, you've entered the city and are inside the walls.

And how can those who are inside the city grow in the perfect peace and unshakable joy that come from knowing their security? By trusting in Jesus. Look at verses 3-4 again –

*You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.*

*Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.*

This “perfect peace” is actually “peace, peace” – in Hebrew “Shalom, Shalom.” The doubling of the word is an intensifier. Every believer has peace with God, but not every believer experiences the peace of God.

Years after Isaiah’s ministry, the prophet Jeremiah would condemn the false prophets of his day. In Jeremiah 6 and again in Jeremiah 8, he says, “*They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.*” These people were peddling a cheap peace, or a “cheap grace,” as the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say. What does saying, “peace, peace” where there is no peace look like?

Well, one such preacher in our day does this by taking the focus off of God and putting it on ourselves. When he teaches on Psalm 139, he says, “Be as bold as David was and say “I am amazing, I am wonderful. I am valuable.” Now, that may sound kind of similar to “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” but they’re as different as night and day. We called to praise GOD because He has MADE us fearfully and wonderfully. That’s not at all the same as praising ourselves for how wonderful we are. When you are proclaiming “The Power of I AM” and you’re not proclaiming God as the Great I AM but rather a positive self-image and a positive self-affirmation, you’re exactly 180 degrees off in the wrong direction.

Where is the mind of the believer fixed whom God keeps in perfect peace? Not on self, for sure.

Conclusion: Where is your mind stayed?

*You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
because he trusts in you.
Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.*

Where is your mind stayed?

The best place to go for our application for today’s passage is to Philippians 4:4-9:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to

God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Let's briefly walk through this practical, Gospel-rich instruction from the Apostle Paul. He begins with a command: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say rejoice."* Our mindset at all times and in every circumstance should be to rejoice in the Lord. If you can't rejoice in your circumstances, you can always rejoice in the Lord. If you can't rejoice in your mindset or your emotions, you can always rejoice in the Lord – for the Lord is always good, and we are always kept by Him secure in His city surrounded by the walls of salvation.

If you aren't rejoicing in the Lord, the problem is never your circumstances but your focus. The Apostle Paul wrote this from Roman imprisonment, after he had been unjustly imprisoned in Roman custody for over three years. Betsy ten Boom taught her sister Corrie to give thanks and rejoice in the Lord in a Nazi German concentration camp, where she would later die. And yet her legacy of overcoming Gospel gratitude and holy joy lived on through Corrie's life and ministry for years. The Puritan theologian John Owen had 11 children, 10 of whom died in infancy. One daughter survived to adulthood, married, and shortly thereafter died of consumption. Yet John Owen wrote extensively on communion with God and the glory of Christ.

"We are never nearer Christ than when we find ourselves lost in a holy amazement at His unspeakable love."

"a steady view of the glory of Christ, in his person, grace, and office, through faith—or a constant, lively exercise of faith on him, according as he is revealed unto us in the Scripture—is the only effectual way to obtain a revival from under our spiritual decays, and such supplies of grace as shall make us flourishing and fruitful even in old age."

When rejoice in the Lord always, we then pray to God about everything always. And we fix our minds on the good and beautiful and true things God has given us. That's what it means to have our minds stayed on the LORD, and that's also what it means to actively trust Him. Look to Him. Give thanks to Him, Rejoice in Him. Pour out your heart to Him in prayer. Think about Him and His good gifts. Trust in Him at all times. This is the key to the peace we all need but never find in the world or in ourselves. May the LORD be pleased to give it to us in Himself.

