

For the last few weeks we have heard of the oracles against the nations.

Ten oracles proclaiming the coming day of the LORD,
when Yahweh would strike the nations,
and every power would be humbled.

Mighty Assyria would plunder the nations,
but in the midst of its glory,
it too would fall to Babylon.

But Babylon itself would not stand.
For the LORD himself will cast down the mighty.

Where was a poor nation like Judah to turn?

Isaiah insists that there is no hope in earthly alliances.
Jerusalem must trust in the LORD.

Now in chapters 24-27 Isaiah reflects upon these oracles in a tale of two cities.

Chapters 24-25, which we are looking at tonight, speak of the city of man.

Chapters 26-27, which we will look at next week, speak of the city of God.

These chapters continue the themes of the oracles,
emphasizing the coming Day of the LORD,
when Yahweh will bring judgment upon the earth,
humbling every power that raises itself up against God.

And I mean every power—

whether social, military, or economic—every power shall be cast down.

In the last 200 years we have seen a significant amount of social leveling.

The old aristocracies have come crashing down,
but we still have our layers of society.

The wealthy and powerful are still in control.

You can see from the outline in the bulletin that Isaiah 24-27 is a single literary unit –
a single chiasm.

24:1-13 speaks of the harvest of the earth,
using the language of desolation, gleaning,
and the guilt of Israel as the reason for the judgment of the earth.

27:7-13 concludes the section,
using the same vocabulary to speak of both judgment and blessing.

24:1-13 The Lord’s harvest (Israel’s sin as the reason for judgment)

24:14-16 The song of the remnant

24:16-20 The earth overthrown

24:21-23 The earth waiting for judgment

25:1-5 The song of the ruined city

25:6-12 Mount Zion

26:1-6 The song of the strong city
26:7-21 The people of God waiting for deliverance
27:1 Leviathan overthrown
27:2-6 The song of the remnant – the Song of the Vineyard
27:7-13 The Lord’s harvest (Israel’s atonement as the reason for blessing)
(From J. Alec Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah, pages 194-195)

If you want to understand the city of man,
watch how Isaiah weaves together language of creation, flood, and Babel.

1. The Earth and the Land – Jerusalem and Babylon (v1-13)

*Behold, the LORD will empty the earth^[a] and make it desolate,
and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.*

² *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.

³ *The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered;
for the LORD has spoken this word.*

But God says that there is a day coming when he will empty the earth and make it desolate.

Now the Hebrew word for “the earth” “*ha’aretz*” can mean either “the earth”

meaning the whole world,

or “the land” – meaning simply Israel.

But after speaking of the judgments coming upon ten nations in the previous 11 chapters,
it seems quite likely that Isaiah is referring to the whole earth.

But the ambiguity may well be intentional.

Israel and Judah are receiving the judgment of God precisely

because they are the covenant mediator.

They are the nation that should have known better.

And as Jerusalem goes, so go the cities of all the earth.

I’d like for you to hear something of the poetry of Isaiah.

In verse 2, each couplet consists of two words in Hebrew:

ca’am, cacohen

ca’ebed, ca’donai

cashiptah, cagbirtah

caponeh, cammoken

caloveh, kannosheh

As the people, so the priest,

as the slave, so his master

as the maid, so her mistress
as the buyer, so the seller
as the lender, so the borrower
as the creditor, so the debtor.

Isaiah had a good eye for the rhetorical flourish!
There is some great poetry in this passage.
Plays on words, complex rhyme schemes,
 assonance—Isaiah plainly wants his hearers to recognize
 that this passage is crucial in the argument of his book.
The oracles concerning the nations did not have this level of sophistication.
 But Isaiah is now reflecting on the oracles,
 and crafting a summary of what the oracles mean.

The oracles deliver a devastating blow to the nations.
The inhabitants of the earth will be scattered.
This is the language of Babel from Genesis 11.
God is returning the ordered cities to the chaos whence they came.

This social leveling in verse 2 does not result from beneficent market forces!
No, the earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered;
 for Yahweh has spoken this word.
To communicate the emphasis on “this word,”
 we could translate it, Yahweh has spoken it, the word, this one.

God is going to bring the city of man to nothing.
 And in response to this word—yes, this word,

⁴ *The earth mourns and withers;
 the world languishes and withers;
 the highest people of the earth languish.*

⁵ *The earth lies defiled
 under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed the laws,
 violated the statutes,
 broken the everlasting covenant.*

Normally this sort of language is reserved for Israel.
 This is why some commentators think that “ha-aretz”
 should be translated “the land,”
 and that this passage is about Jerusalem.
And in a certain sense that is true.
Jerusalem is the center of this passage,
 but Isaiah keeps moving back and forth from Jerusalem language

to “nations” language,
suggesting that Jerusalem—which was supposed to be the City of God,
the place where God’s kingdom was established on earth,
has become the city of man.

And in this way, the “everlasting covenant” can be seen in a sense
as the Abrahamic covenant—but because the Abrahamic covenant
includes the provision that all nations shall be blessed
through the seed of Abraham,
we can see within and beyond Abraham to Adam.

The house of David has broken the Davidic covenant;
the house of Israel has broken the Mosaic covenant;
the seed of Abraham has broken the Abrahamic covenant;
the sons of Adam have broken the Adamic covenant.

Because any interpretation of Isaiah 24 that limits the covenant breaking to Israel
simply misses the cosmic darkness that falls over the whole earth in this passage.

The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants.

God had created Adam to rule over his creation.

He was to be a blessing to the creation.

And yet through his sin, he brought a curse to the earth

And so Isaiah says:

*⁶ 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.*

Now the sin of the house of David—the sin of the people of Israel—
the sin of the seed of Abraham—proves its cosmic consequences.

Far from being a royal priesthood and a holy nation,
mediating the blessings of God to the whole earth,
Israel is a curse to the nations.

Therefore the rejoicing of the city of man is brought to an end (7-12)

*⁷ The wine mourns,
the vine languishes,
all the merry-hearted sigh.*

*⁸ The mirth of the tambourines is stilled,
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,
the mirth of the lyre is stilled.*

*⁹ No more do they drink wine with singing;
strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.*

*¹⁰ The wasted city is broken down;
every house is shut up so that none can enter.*

¹¹ There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine;

*all joy has grown dark;
the gladness of the earth is banished.*
¹² *Desolation is left in the city;
the gates are battered into ruins.*

Joy has departed from the earth.
Even the wine mourns,
the tambourines are stilled.
No more do they drink wine with singing.
The wasted city is broken down;
every house is shut up so that none can enter.
“Wasted city” misses the image here.
In Genesis 1:2 God describes the earth as formless and void,
tohu vbohu—empty and barren.
This is the city of tohu.
God has returned the city of man to emptiness and chaos.
This is the undoing of creation.
This is a city without meaning or purpose—a city that has forgotten her chief end.
Instead, there is 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.
This is what shall happen to the city of man.

Let me pause just a moment and point out that Isaiah is weaving together images
that tie together everything he has said in the whole book so far.

Verse 2 uses the same sort of poetry as chapter 3, verses 1-3,
verse 3 draws on chapters 1 and 10 (the plundering of the earth)
verse 4 from chapter 16 (the languishing of the earth),
[I could keep going]

Israel is not only the unique people of God with a unique inheritance –
Israel is also the exemplar of the nations.

¹³ *For thus 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 grape harvest is done.*

God often uses the image of Israel as the olive tree –
an olive tree here “in the midst of the earth” – or is it, “in the midst of the land”?
either way: it is “among the nations” – among the peoples.

And so you hear voices rising from the ends of the earth:

2. The Song of the Remnant (24:14-16a)

¹⁴ *They lift up their voices, they sing for joy;*

over the majesty of the LORD they shout from the west. (actually, “from the sea”).

¹⁵ *Therefore in the east* [actually, “from the fires” – referring to the sunrise] *give glory to the LORD;*

in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel.

¹⁶ *From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise,
of glory to the Righteous One.*

You can say “from the west” or “in the east” – but it kinda ruins the poetry!

“They shout from the sea” and they give glory “from the fires” –
captures better what Isaiah is doing.

After all, what are the realms that God created?
The heavens and the earth and the seas.

When you say “the west” you are missing the downward focus on the “seas” –
the realm of the waters under the earth.

And when you say “the east” you are missing the upward focus on the “fires” –
the realm of the sun, moon, and stars.

Isaiah is hearing the voices of all creation.

After all, who are “they”?

Who are the ones who are singing for joy from the ends of the earth?

We just heard that a curse has devoured the earth!

The noise of the jubilant has ceased.

The wasted city is broken down.

Who is singing for joy?

Not Isaiah!

3. The Earth Overthrown: the Lament of Isaiah (v16b-20)

But I say, “I waste away,

I waste away. Woe is me!

For the traitors have betrayed,

with betrayal the traitors have betrayed.”

The stern vision in the oracle concerning the wilderness of the sea,
of the betrayer betraying, is now seen in its full terror (cf. Isaiah 21:2).
Isaiah uses the same word five times in one sentence.

There are only five words in this sentence,
and they are all forms of the same word!
Bogdim bagadu ubeged bogdim bagadu
“betrayers betray; with betrayal betrayers betray”
Those who flee from Assyria will fall before Babylon.

And so Isaiah continues to use the language of the three realms of creation –
but now he replaces the “seas” with the pit:

¹⁷ *Terror and the pit and the snare^[d]
are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth!*

¹⁸ *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.*

¹⁹ *The earth is utterly broken,
the earth is split apart,
the earth is violently shaken.*

Judgment now comes upon the earth,
as the windows of heaven are opened –
something that hasn’t happened since the Flood!
And the foundations of the earth tremble.

A great earthquake shakes the earth!

And that is merely a lesson for every age,
because there is no refuge from sin:

²⁰ *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.*

Hmm. The windows of heaven open, bringing judgment on the earth –
and then someone staggers like a drunken man
in the context of an everlasting covenant...

Just like Noah (in Gen 6-9),
who saw the windows of heaven opened in the Flood,
with whom God made an everlasting covenant,
and who wound up getting drunk...

The lesson of Noah was that even the one righteous man was not righteous enough.
When God destroyed sinful humanity – and started over with the one righteous man –
things spiraled back out of control *really fast*.
The thoughts of man’s heart are wicked from his youth.

This is also drawing on language from chapter 19 on the staggering of Egypt,
But as we saw then –
the drunken staggering of Egypt
came just before the hope of Egypt’s redemption!

And so:

4. The Earth Waiting for Judgment (24:21-23)

²¹ *On that day the LORD will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.*

²² *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.*

²³ *Then the moon will be confounded
and the sun ashamed,
for the LORD of hosts reigns
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and his glory will be before his elders.*

On that day the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem.
When heaven and earth is judged –
when all rebels are gathered in the pit –
when the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed,

that is when the glory of the LORD will shine in Zion.

You can see where Revelation 21-22 gets its imagery of the glory of the New Jerusalem.
The light of moon and sun will be darkened,
for the LORD God will be the light of the city.

But it is equally important to see the *beginning* of that Day
when the Day of the LORD came upon Jesus at the cross.

Isaiah clearly sees that the Day of Judgment and the Day of Renewal
are closely tied together.

5. The Song of the Ruined City: “You Have Been a Stronghold to the Poor” (25:1-5)

25 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.
² For you have made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;
the foreigners' palace is a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.

Isaiah takes up a song of praise (25:1-2)

The city of man will be cast down, never to be rebuilt.
This plainly recalls 13:20, which promised that Babylon would forever be a waste;
but it goes beyond Babylon to forecast destruction
to every foreigners palace which sets itself up against the city of God.

Therefore, Isaiah declares,

³ Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.
⁴ For you have been a stronghold to the poor,
a stronghold to the needy in his distress,
a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat;
for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall,
⁵ like heat in a dry place.
You subdue the noise of the foreigners;
as heat by the shade of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is put down.

Because God himself is our fortress.

We do not need a walled city, for a mighty fortress is our God.
He is our help and our shield.

Against the backdrop of Ahaz and Hezekiah constantly seeking foreign alliances,
Isaiah celebrates the fact that God alone is the strength and hope of the poor.

There are two songs – the song of the ruthless, which will be put down –
and the song of the poor – the song of praise that arises from the ends of the earth.

6. The Feast of Zion for All Peoples (25:6-12)

⁶ 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 on this mountain Yahweh of hosts will make a feast of rich food 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.
Isaiah speaks of the wedding supper of the Lamb,
when all God's people are gathered from the ends of the earth.
And somehow connected to this feast is the destruction of death.
(Read 7-8)

⁷ *And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.*
⁸ *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.*

This would make a certain amount of sense to Isaiah's hearers,
because three times a year they gathered in Jerusalem for the feasts of Israel,
and the sacrifices moved from the burnt offering, dealing with sin,
to the peace offering, celebrating the peace and fellowship between God and man.
But of course, we understand this much better.

Because when we partake of the Lord's Supper,
we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
Because in his death, Jesus has defeated the power of death,
and as Paul tells us, quoting from Isaiah 25,
"Then shall come to pass the saying that is written:
'death is swallowed up in victory.'" (1 Cor 15:54)

We have seen the death of death in the death of Christ,
and we partake of that death and resurrection every time we partake of the feast.
And on that final day, the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth."

And it will be said on that day (verse 9):

⁹ *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."*
¹⁰ *For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain,
and Moab shall be trampled down in his place,
as straw is trampled down in a dunghill.^[e]*
¹¹ *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^[f] of his hands.*
¹² *And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down,*

lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.

God himself is our refuge.

He is the one who delivers his people from death

The contrast with Moab is instructive.

Moab was condemned for his pride (in chapter 16).

And once again Moab is trying to go it alone.

But God will cast down the proud and will bring down the walls of Moab's fortresses.

We have reached the middle of the conclusion of Isaiah's second section (chapters 13-27).

The city of man will be cast down,
and Zion will be exalted as the City of God.

Next week we will look more particularly at the city of God,
but we are reminded that here we have no abiding city.

We have no earthly stronghold that can provide security against the power of the nations.

Notice that in 25:3 Isaiah says that "strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you."

That is the best the city of man can do.

The city of man may give glory to God by fearing him,
but it can never become the city of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has done what he promised.

He has defeated the power of death and has established a heavenly city for his people.

"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him that he might save us.

This is Yahweh; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

How do you read the "signs of the times"?

It's easy to get all doom and gloom

over the ways in which the City of Man seems to be in the ascendancy.

But Isaiah teaches us see the world differently.

The desolation of the City of Man – the drunken staggering of the nations –
is part of God's purpose in subduing the nations to himself.

The City of Man – the nations of the earth –

need to see that their plans, their schemes, their ways
all end in death.

You might think – but haven't we learned this yet?