

## Two Cities: God's Supremacy (Isaiah 24.1-27.13)

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Hebrews 11.8-10)*

- There is a judgment of God at the end of history & a judgment of God within history.
- Salvation through judgment is a prevalent theme throughout Scripture.
- Individuals are judged in eternity & nations are judged throughout the course of history
- There are people within the people & there is a church within the church.
- Self-worship is the religion of mankind.

Motyer outlines Isaiah into three major sections:

- I. The book of the King 1-37
- II. The book of the Servant 38 - 55
- III. The book of the Anointed Conqueror 56 - 66

It seems to me that the rank and file Christians in America despair that they are losing the battle to win the culture for Christ. But, **the conflict is not to reclaim the American cultural for Christ (we never really owned it) but to proclaim the truth of the gospel in a biblically sound and culturally relevant way in the midst of an unbelieving culture.** Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians: *Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself* (Philippians 3.20). We live in and are affected by a world that is falling apart, but the Christian man or woman has been and is being transformed by the love of God. Tim Keller translates Martin Luther's axiom *simul justus et peccator* into the cultural vernacular: **"A Christian is more flawed and sinful than you'd ever dare believe and yet more loved and accepted than you'd ever dare hope – at the same moment."** So then, we live in the midst of the city of man but we are citizens of the city of God.

There are five subheadings in Isaiah found in chapters 24 – 27 and they contain an overarching **theme of two cities**: the city of destruction (Isaiah 24.10; 25.2-3 **the earthly city**) and the strong city (Isaiah 26.1; **the heavenly city**). The literary motif of two cities is a means whereby the unrighteous and the righteous are contrasted.

The chapters may be subdivided as follows:

1. The city (the earth) is desolate (24.1-20).  
The quest for the global village (the city of man) is as ancient as the building of the tower of Babel, but every attempt at achieving world peace outside of reconciliation with God has ended in failure (v24.12 *Desolation is left in the city; the gates are battered into ruins*). The Lord scattered the prideful inhabitants of Babel and the men who are at enmity with God continue to be at enmity with one another. So, the curse of sin marches onward devouring the earth. The preacher in Ecclesiastes tells us that, under the sun death reigns and *all is vanity a chasing after the wind*. World peace may be a noble goal but making it a reality is as likely as hanging onto a handful of wind. Certainly pray for kings and those in authority that we might enjoy lives of quietness and peace, but know for that sin is pervasive and ever divisive. The believer's only security lies in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.
2. The Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion (24.21-23).  
*In or on that day* (cf. 24.21, 25.9, 26.1, 27.1, 2, 12, 13) is a reoccurring phrase throughout Isaiah and this section is no exception as Isaiah looks from his present day to the near future and then to the distant future. He has in mind the fulfilment of the Davidic promise; this is the end of history. The big picture of Isaiah is the big picture of Scripture.
3. The eternal delight of salvation at the banquet table of God (25.1-12).  
This is one of the great passages of Scripture. This is the ultimate and eternal reality – a banquet. This is the eternal enjoyment God has prepared for his people; this is what salvation is – an eternal bounty, hilarious joy of the Lamb's wedding breakfast; it is the confident expectation of all believers; namely, an upward and onward gaze of the eye looking for the coming of the Son of Man. *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."*
4. The eternal city of God (26.1-21).  
The people of God are safe in the strong city of salvation – that is the true city of God. The Israelites fortified Jerusalem and with the building of Hezekiah's tunnel they secured a water supply within its walls but the self-reliance of Israel was not enough to save them. *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 is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD God is an everlasting rock.*

v2 the righteous person keeps faith with God

v3 that faith results in everlasting peace

v4 and eternal security of their salvation

v5-6 the lofty city of man is laid low

v8-17 the people of God are secure in their salvation but not immune to trouble, privation and abuse for they live in an unresponsive world. Nevertheless, what happens them is subject to the decretive will of God (v9). The righteous learn by God's judgment and the unrighteous are condemned by it.

v19 "The people of the city, the people of peace and faith look forward to a resurrection that is a resurrection indeed, not the shadowy life of the soul dislocated from the body, but the whole person resurrected" (Alec Motyer *Isaiah by the Day: A New Devotional Translation* p. 130)

5. The great eschatological ingathering of God's people (27.1-13).

What the Lord begins he finishes – this is the third time Isaiah speaks of the Lord's vineyard (3.13-15; 5.1-7). The people of God have not produced the fruit of righteousness, but those who are rooted in Christ will bear the fruit of the Spirit (cf. John 15 & Colossians 2.6). Ultimately in that day the trumpet will sound: it may be the sound of the trumpet of Jubilee announcing freedom from all things past, or it may be sound of the Exodus trumpet call you to come near to God, but above all it is the sound of the trumpet announcing the coming of our great Lord and Savior Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4.16).

The premise of two cities representing two distinct peoples and two separate destinies is first suggested in Genesis 4-5. It is the real beginning of the historical tale of two cities, the city of God and the city of man. Augustine (AD 354 – 430), the church father, wrote about these two systems, one founded by Cain and the other by God and developed through the line of Abel. **In the city of men, men love themselves and hate God; in the city of God, men love God and question the integrity of their hearts (cf. Jeremiah 17.9).** The realization that the city of man was an idol doomed for destruction was not a thought that came easily to Augustine. What was essentially a post-millennial worldview greatly influenced his understanding of salvation history. He envisioned that the redemptive work of Christ would eventually permeate all the cultures of the world and the church would become the bride of Christ, not just spiritually but concretely. (Augustine was not without warrant in believing the gospel would and was transforming the Roman culture. Already a significant spiritual impact had been made upon the Goths by the missionary Ulfilas (311-381) who had translated the Bible into the Germanic language using the Greek alphabet to create a written language for the Goths, much like the Wycliffe Bible Translators do today.) However, with the fall of Rome Augustine was

forced to rethink his theology of the community of God and from it came the most definitive work on the nature of man in society, namely, *The City of God*.

The monumental treatise was written between AD 413-26 during a time of great political and social upheaval. The Vandals were invading North Africa; the Franks were advancing into what is now France; the Saxons were beginning the conquest of England; the Lombards (also a Germanic people) were demonstrating interest in the north central regions of the Roman empire; the Goths had long since crossed the Baltic sea; and now the Visigoths and Ostrogoths were preparing to press heavily into Rome's European possessions. It must have seemed as though the World was about to end. It was shortly after this that Attila the Hun appeared on the scene (AD 433). In the midst of this great political and social unrest Augustine penned the following: **“You are surprised that the world is losing its grip; that the world is grown old? Think of a man. He is born, he grows up, he becomes old. Old age has many complaints: coughing, shaking, failing eyesight, anxious, terribly tired. A man grows old; he is full of complaints. The world is old; it is full of pressing tribulations ... Do not hold on to the old man the world, do not refuse to regain your youth in Christ who says to you: ‘the world is passing away, the world is losing its grip, the world is short of breath. Do not fear, thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle.’”**

C. S. Lewis wrote an essay entitled, “The World’s Last Night,” in which he depicted the end of the world as we presently know it. The Bible makes frequent reference to the catastrophic events of those days and the wise person acts in the present with his or her eye on the future. The apostle John wrote of the earthly city’s great destruction: *And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lied in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, “Alas! Alas! You great city, you might city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come”* (Revelation 18.9-10). It is God who judges and it is God who saves. **“The dominant figure throughout the landscape of these chapters is God himself, judging and saving. God is the reason why the city of man cannot endure, and why the city of God cannot fall, and God will have the final word in both overwhelming woe and overwhelming joy. That is the vision of Isaiah 24 – 27”** (Ray Ortlund, Jr., *Isaiah*, p. 143). Isaiah’s vision of God’s redemptive plan is global. And those who have ears to hear and eyes to see will be attentive to God’s handiwork in history (cf. Isaiah 6.10; 11.3-4; 30.9-11; 42.20).

This life's dim windows of the soul  
distort the heavens from pole to pole  
and lead you to believe a lie

When you see with, not through the eye” (cf. 2 Corinthians 4.16-18).

A CITY DOOMED FOR DESTRUCTION

As with the two preceding sections of Isaiah (13-20 and 21-23) the Israelites are the centerpiece of Isaiah's prophecy. What God will do to secure salvation for the whole world is tied up with what he will do through those who are heirs of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. **Before the eschatological heavenly city (Revelation 21.2, the new Jerusalem) is established God will judge the whole earth for its idolatry. As wickedness rules all the joy of living is sucked out of the world. Sin always robs humankind of every legitimate pleasure (Isaiah 24.11).** God exercises his sovereignty over all the earth by bringing all nations and individuals to judgment. Isaiah's poetic imagery of God's judgment loses something in the translation: "**The 'feeling' is as of a series of hammer blows, as if we were watching the city being brought to ruins.** The subtle use of assonance cannot be reflected in the translation but proclaims Isaiah's authorship in every division of the poem, if not in every line" (J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, p. 200). In creation God gave form to the world out of nothing, but now, the destruction of the world is so great it retreats to its original formlessness. The city of man is empty; it lacks the transcendent beauty of God's holiness. Purpose and meaning is only to be found in its relationship to God. There is a fleeting pleasure associated with sin, but it is always accompanied by isolation, loneliness and judgment: Rejoice O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment (Ecclesiastes 11.9).

Isaiah repeatedly uses **the expression *On or in that day*** and these chapters (24-27) are no exception. He makes reference to either the temporal or eschatological judgments of God seven times (24.21; 25.9; 26.1; 27.1, 2, 12, 13). **There is no escaping the sovereign rule of the LORD of hosts. Let the unbelieving reader be warned and let the believing reader take heart.** There is a glorious day coming when the sun will be ashamed of its lack luster dullness. The glory of the Lord is greater than all the stars of heaven.

#### A STRONG CITY

**The day is coming when the whole world will sing the song, "Glory to the Righteous One"** (Isaiah 24.16a). In chapter 25 Isaiah gives us the details of this song: *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 (Isaiah 25.4).* Moreover, all people in every place will have all their needs met in superabundance and if all this were not enough, death, the curse of the first sin, will be removed: *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 (Isaiah 25.8; cf. Revelation 21.3-4).* **In that day there will be an uncontainable joy in the Lord. Everyone and everything that opposes the glory of God will be removed because the outstretched hand of the Lord will reign down justice and every tongue will confess him as Lord (cf. Isaiah 9.12b; 45.23; Romans 14.11; Philippians 2.9-11).** Those who have patiently waited for the

Lord's vindication will be satisfied and they will rejoice in their salvation (cf. Revelation 6.9-11).

The reader has seen what happens to the cities of men: they are abandoned, forsaken and deserted cities (17.1-3, 9), cities that have ceased to function and have been cannibalized for anything useful (22.9-11). **Those who are not firm in their faith can have no foundation at all (Isaiah 7.9b). There is no security in political alliances. The strong city is comprised of people who trust in the Lord for their safety: *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 is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD God is an everlasting rock* (Isaiah 26.1-4).** People of faith readily acknowledge they can do nothing in themselves to merit God's favor; they owe everything to God. The wicked, on the other hand, refuse to be instructed in righteousness and they are fit only for destruction (26.10-11). God's people can look forward to occupying their place in the city of God. The prevailing characteristic of the city is peace (26.3, 10). A biblical conception of peace embraces both a qualitative and quantitative fulfillment of man's basic need to be whole. That is, his relationship with God is completely restored. **The New Testament provides a fuller understanding of how peace with God is obtained: namely, it is the secured through faith in the reconciling work of Christ atoning sacrifice (Romans 5.1-5; cf. 2 Corinthians 5.17-21).**

**Isaiah closes these chapters with a vision of a new Eden where the universal Israel (27.6) fills the whole earth. The guilt of Jacob has been atoned for and his sin will be removed.** In that day the trumpet of God will sound and all those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to Egypt will return to worship the Lord. Everyone who belongs to the Lord will be with him forever. Between now and then the believer needs to remember that he or she is true citizen of the city of God. **The apostle Paul understood the distinction between these two worlds and encouraged his readers to follow his example: *Brothers join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself* (Philippians 3.17-21).**