

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...

So opens Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, contrasting London and Paris at the rise of the French Revolution. That one sentence study in juxtaposition describes, in many ways, today's passage. Like Dickens, Isaiah offers a tale of two cities. The first city is the City of Earth. The second, I will call the City of Heaven. The City of Earth is the world's systems set up in rebellion against the Lord. The City of Heaven is Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where the Lord of Armies reigns as king.

Isaiah's tale comes to us with the same urgency it did in Isaiah's day because, in the end, there are only two cities. We are born sinners, citizens of the City of Earth, headed for ruin. The Lord calls us to forsake all hope of salvation through human strength, ingenuity, and government. We are to hope for the city to come, patiently waiting for the Lord of Armies who reigns as king.

In **Isaiah 24**, we see the end of the City of Earth: **The City of Earth is being consumed by the wrath of God.** Isaiah paints a terrifying picture. In **verse 1, God's wrath is imminent**, so near Isaiah can say, "**the Lord is stripping the earth bare,**" already "**making it desolate.**" Paul writes that "**God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness.**"ⁱ Judgment is already begun. We should live in light of it and never be lulled into comfort, believing we have a home here.

In verse 2, God's wrath is indiscriminate—all will be judged, regardless of status. In verse 3, God's wrath is absolute—the entire earth will be "stripped completely bare." **Verses 4–6 outline the reason for God's wrath.** At creation, God commanded his image bearers to rule the world. But they "transgressed teachings, overstepped decrees, and broken the permanent covenant." Instead of a flourishing garden, "**the earth is polluted by its inhabitants**"—"a curse has consumed the earth."

In verses 7–13, God's wrath brings utter desolation. Instead of a prosperous vineyard, the vine withers, and the party stops. There's no more wine. The beer is bitter. The musicians go home. "**Only desolation remains in the city; its gate has collapsed in ruins. For this is how it will be on earth among the nations: like a harvested olive tree, like a gleaning after a grape harvest.**"

In verses 14–16, we hear good news—in wrath, God remembers mercy! A remnant is being saved among the nations. "**From the ends of the earth we hear songs: The Splendor of the Righteous One.**" But Isaiah cannot join the song. He is ripped out of this glorious vision to the present, in which he still dwells among treacherous people who need to return to the Lord—"Woe is me!"

In verses 17-18, God's wrath is inescapable. Those who won't run to Christ in faith are like prey stalked by a skilled hunter. They flee in panic and fall into a pit. If they escape the pit, a trap awaits. **In verses 19-20, we see that God's wrath is final. "Earth's rebellion weighs it down, and it**

falls, never to rise again.” In verses 21-22, God’s wrath is certain. “On that day the Lord will punish...” It is written down on his calendar. He won’t miss the appointment.

Finally, verse 23 shows that the day of judgment is an apocalypse, the "unveiling" of God's glory. “The moon will be put to shame and the sun disgraced, because the Lord of Armies will reign as king on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, and he will display his glory in the presence of his elders.”

When God’s glory is revealed, the most amazing heavenly bodies revealed by the Webb Telescope will hang their heads in shame. They have no beauty at all when compared to that of God.

This is the goal of it all: the revelation of God’s glory in Jesus the King. Both cities claim to be cities of glory. The City of Earth is the glory of human strength, wisdom, and government. The City of Heaven is the glory of God's king. One will be put to shame; the other will shine forever. Will you hope in yourself and this world? Or will you hope in Christ?

In **Isaiah 25**, we see what awaits those who trust in Jesus: **The Lord will throw a party for his people.** Notice the structure: **Verses 1-5** contains a song of praise sung by an individual. **Verses 6-8** describe a banquet prepared by the Lord for his people. **Verses 9-12** are the corporate song God's people sing at the feast. **The meal is the centerpiece of the chapter, focused on what the Lord has done for his people.** The Lord is the host, and, best of all, everyone is invited to come. **“The Lord of Armies will prepare for all the peoples a feast of choice meat, a feast with aged wine...”**

In the previous chapter, the whole party comes to a screeching halt in the City of the Earth. The wine is gone; the beer is bitter; the music stops. That’s what death is like. You’re gathered around a birthday cake and punch bowl, ready for some fun—and then some throws a big wet blanket over the whole thing. The cake is ruined; the punch is spilled; all the guests are crying and want to go home. But it’s not so in the City of Heaven — **“He will swallow up the burial shroud, the shroud over all the peoples, the sheet covering all the nations. When he has swallowed up death once and for all, the Lord God will wipe away the tears from every face and remove his people’s disgrace from the whole earth, for the Lord has spoken.”** The Lord himself will swallow death and wipe away tears.

What is this feast? It is the person and work of Jesus Christ. He received the wrath of God in his own body. His shed blood atoned for our sin. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is **“a feast of choice meat, a feast with aged wine, prime cuts of choice meat, fine vintage wine.”** For Jesus said:

...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.ⁱⁱ Jesus is the Lord of the Banquet—and the food he has prepared for us is himself. We feast on his body and blood when we receive Jesus by faith. When we trust in him, the benefits of the cross are applied to us—our sin is removed, and we are declared righteous in God's sight.

This gospel feast is glorious, satisfying, joyful, and offered to all! But it's only available at one location—**"on this mountain."** You must come to the City of Heaven to enjoy it. What does that entail? It means faithfully depending on Jesus to save you.

Verses 1-5 describe the personal faith of those who feast. **"Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you."** Each of God's people believes he has saved them and will save them: **"For you have been a stronghold for the poor person, a stronghold for the needy in his distress, a refuge from storms and a shade from heat. When the breath of the violent is like a storm against a wall, like heat in a dry land, you will subdue the uproar of barbarians."** God's people believe that, in Christ, we have a place of safety and that he will destroy every enemy, even death.

Verses 9-12 describe the corporate faith of those who feast. God's redeemed people sing together: **"Look, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he has saved us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him. Let's rejoice and be glad in his salvation."** Being saved means leaving the City of Earth to wait together for God to save us. We believe **"the Lord's power will rest on this mountain."** In the city we seek, in our homeland, the Lord's power *rests*—it settles and remains there, and nothing can move it. But it is not so for those who stay in the City of Earth.

Instead of a feast, the Lord will force his enemies to go swimming in poop. **"But Moab will be trampled in his place as straw is trampled in a dung pile. He will spread out his arms in the middle of it, as a swimmer spreads out his arms to swim."** The difference between those who enjoy a feast and those who swim in poop is faith—waiting for God (and God alone) to save you.

In Isaiah 26, we're reminded that God's people are waiting to receive what they've already seen. Right now, the City of Earth is enjoying a party, not knowing that it will soon be swimming in liquid manure. But where are God's people right now? They are waiting in faith.

We've seen the City of Heaven from afar in the gospel. We've even tasted the appetizer of the Spirit. We're so close the author of Hebrews says, **"you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering...."** Yet, he says, **"we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."** *Receiving*—we do not yet have it in its fulness.

We are a people who wait. That's why we gather in local churches—little outposts of the Kingdom—to encourage each other to keep believing the gospel until the City arrives. One way we do this is through our singing. **In verses 1-6, we find a song of future glory.** We remind each other that we really do **"have a strong city"** and that **"salvation is established"** in Jesus. We remind each other the gates will be opened for the righteous to come in, those who faithfully hope in the Lord! We remind each other that God gives eternal peace to those who depend on him. So, we remind each other to **"trust in the Lord forever"** because he is an eternal rock. He has crushed the City of Earth that looked so invincible, trampling it under the feet of the humble (his people!).

Verses 7-11 describe how painful our present wait can be. “Yes, Lord, we wait for you in the path of your judgments.” We wait...*in the path of judgments*. As exiles on earth, where God's wrath is being revealed, we feel the sting of death. We experience the futility of life under the sun. We long for the Lord in the darkness of a world where the wicked haven't learned righteousness. His **"hand is lifted up to take action, but they do not see it."**

Verses 12-13 are an excellent description of saving faith. It's not here yet—but **“Lord, you will establish peace for us.”** We know you will give us peace, **“for you have also done all our work for us.”** God has already done all the work on our behalf through Jesus Christ. **“Lord our God, lords other than you have owned us—but we remember your name alone.”** We were once owned by other gods. But we've turned, and we remember your name alone. We believe, and we wait.

Verses 14-18 describe how futile waiting can feel. These verses picture a day when the Lord had brought Israel some redemption—expanding the nation. And yet, the people are still in distress. Their salvation would come through the pain of chastisement. The Lord was disciplining them to teach them obedience—just as he disciplines us. You know you're saved, but it feels like judgment.

Do you feel **verse 16**? You go to God in distress, whispering prayers because his discipline is on you? You know he's saved you and promised you a party, but it sure feels like you're swimming in poop! **“We have won no victories on earth, and the earth's inhabitants have not fallen.”** What about **verses 17-18**? **“As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pains, so we were before you, Lord. We became pregnant, we writhed in pain; we gave birth to wind.”** Nine months of pregnancy, hour after hour of painful contractions—all just to pass gas.

Sometimes sanctification feels like being pregnant with wind! For the sake of Jesus, your body is wrecked, every part aching. You discipline your eating, drinking, breathing. You labor, sweat, bleed. Finally, groaning in agony, you push with all your might—and all you deliver is a fart! ! We're stuck in this wretched body of death—doing what we don't want to do, failing to do what we want to do!

That's why we need to remind each other of what we have seen by faith—**verse 19**: **“Your dead will live; their bodies will rise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust! For you will be covered with the morning dew, and the earth will bring out the departed spirits.”** Jesus Christ is making all things new. He is coming soon, and the new City is coming with him. So, Isaiah tells us:

Go, my people, enter your rooms and close your doors behind you. Hide for a little while until the wrath has passed. For look, the Lord is coming from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity. The earth will reveal the blood shed on it and will no longer conceal her slain. On that day the Lord with his relentless, large, strong sword will bring judgment on Leviathan, the fleeing serpent—Leviathan, the twisting serpent. He will slay the monster that is in the sea.

We're like the Israelites in Egypt on the first Passover, hiding in our houses, waiting for God's wrath to pass. The Lord is coming to slay, not Pharaoh, but Leviathan—the “monstrous sum of the world's

evil.”ⁱⁱⁱ We hide under the blood of the Lamb slain to take away our sins. We wait, saved by faith, for God's wrath to judge the earth and establish a new world dwells—and what a world it will be.

Isaiah 27 shows us the New Garden City of God. In **Isaiah 5**, the Lord sang about his vineyard, which produced undesirable fruit and needed to be torn down. Now, in **Isaiah 27**, he invites us to sing about a future “desirable vineyard.” The Lord cares for this vineyard tenderly. He is not angry with it as he was with the last one. In fact, his love for it is so intense that he wishes there were thorns to trample just to display his devotion! This vineyard is invited to be at peace with him.

This vineyard is the people of God taking root, blossoming, blooming, and filling the whole world with fruit. Who is this fruitful vine? Jesus said, “**I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.**”^{iv} Jesus is the true Israel of God. To be part of God's vine, you must be grafted into Jesus through faith. As we abide in him, we will bear fruit and multiply, fill the earth, and bless it, as God created us to do. If we're in Jesus, we will flourish one day. That promise sustains us in painful seasons of pruning.

Verses 7-11 remind us that the Lord prunes his people. But he does not wound them the same way he strikes the City of Earth. The Lord cuts his people for a good purpose. He disciplines every son that he loves to teach obedience. God must break down every old altar, drag the chisel and plow through the rocky soil to prepare it for his vineyard. After he's destroyed the old vineyard, he replants it and makes it flourish. That is what God did in Christ—he crushed his Son so we could see life. That is what God is doing in our sufferings—preparing for us a weight of glory beyond all comprehension.

Those who don't know Jesus don't have this hope. **Verses 10-11 tell us that God will make “the fortified city”—the City of Earth—a wilderness where the trees are fit only for the fire.** They don't know the Lord. “**Therefore their Maker will not have compassion on them, and their Creator will not be gracious to them.**” But look at the tender compassion that the Lord has for his people.

Verses 12-13 — “On that day the Lord will thresh grain from the Euphrates River as far as the Wadi of Egypt, and you Israelites will be gathered one by one.” After the Lord threshes the grain of all the earth, he'll get on his knees and crawl on the floor, gathering kernels one by one, until every last one is in his hand. That is how safe the City of Heaven will be. That is how much Jesus loves us—he will not lose a single one of those who come to him in faith.

Can the world—your friends, your family, your job, your education, your wealth—offer you such security? It can't. Only King Jesus can offer us such a city. That's why his glory will be the centerpiece of the city, and why we will “**worship the Lord at Jerusalem on the holy mountain.**”

Friends, Jesus invites us to an endless party where he is the host, the food, and the servant. All you need do is leave the false security of this world behind and wait for Jesus in faith. Will you join him in the City of God?

ⁱ Romans 1:18

ⁱⁱ John 6:53–56.

ⁱⁱⁱ Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*

^{iv} John 15:1.