

Notes on Isaiah 26 & 27

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Isaiah 24-27 is mostly about the contrast between two cities. God makes one “a heap of rubble” (25:2), but he makes “this mountain” the place where he will destroy death (25:6-8). The contrast is as strong as life and death. This theme continues in 26 & 27. In Isaiah 26, believers will enter their city while the other city is destroyed. God’s people must be patient for God to act supernaturally while they sorrow over their own ineffectiveness. The Day of Judgment is coming, but his people are safe. This chapter will explain how it is that a people so unresponsive to him become a people who yearn to know him.

26:1-4 The news is so good it begins with a song. Worship is not mere observation, because the people participate in the good news when they sing, “*We* have a strong city...” It is a city of a different kind. This does not mean that the promises of God exclude the physical, for there will be a redeemed earth. We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (1 Peter 3:11-13). Isaiah says little of the city in these verses, but more of the kind of people who enter. A good city inhabited by bad people is not what God will allow. The new city has walls of salvation; vv.2,3 show that only saved people enter it.

26:2 Who may enter? This sounds like Psalm 24 with gates opening, but there it is the ascended Christ who enters. Here it is the righteous nation. By now we should know in Isaiah that this singular nation is one nation composed of the saved of all the earth; they come from the ends of the earth (24:14-16); aliens unite with the House of Jacob (14:1); nations “stream” to the House of the Lord in Jerusalem (2:1-4). Those admitted are righteous and keep faith. The New Jerusalem will be the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City (1:26), the enlarged nation (26:15 & 9:3).

26:3 We cannot restrict being righteous to one aspect of salvation. His people are ‘righteous’ because righteousness is imputed to them by the Lord in justification. Believers become righteous in behavior by the Holy Spirit in sanctification. To be accepted by God, we must have the perfect righteousness of Christ, which is what God gives us when we believe (Romans 5:1). Yet no man can see the Lord unless he is holy in his conduct (Hebrews 12:14). We have the righteousness of Christ credited to us when we believe – received as a gift! (Romans 5:17). We will have the full likeness of Christ finished in us later when he comes, and we see him as he is and are made to be like him fully (1 John 3:2). This is not a one-time gift, but an ongoing work of the Spirit all our lives as Christians, completed in a moment when Christ appears. The point in this verse is that it is only the righteous who enter, no one else (Revelation 21:27). When we see the Lord, believers will be righteous in every respect. Only then will God live with his sons and daughters in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21: 27).

26:3,4 In v.2 the righteous keep faith; in vv.3,4 they have faith; they trust; they have a mind that has been steadied, as in Psalm 112:7, to trust God, the Rock eternal. This is very different from trusting in their walls, in their water supply, or in a foreign king to save them. (Note, Christ is the Rock in 1Corinthians 10:4.)

26:5,6: In the previous section it was God who made the walls; in this one it is God Who levels the lofty city to the ground. God protects his glory and humbles all who behave as if they were God. As in 25:12 God brings fortified walls to the dust, so the poor can trample it down. Once wicked leaders ground down the faces of the poor; now the poor walk over the demolished city. As in Luke 16:19-31, the roles of rich and poor have been reversed. Had they humbled themselves, they would have believed and entered in. They remained proud so God humbled them, and they were lost.

26:7-9 The *path of the righteous* is the same as *the way of your laws*. In Psalm 107:7, the way of the righteous is straight, yet the previous verse tells they had trouble. A smooth path is not saying the path is easy, but the person with a clear eye (Luke 11:34-36) lives a life of trust and contentment. We may see difficulty ahead, but when we look back we say it has been good. In a psalm that has in it death for Jesus, he says the lines had fallen to him in pleasant places (Psalm 16:6). His experience had been assigned to him by his Father; that made all the difference. Because his laws are good and not burdensome (1 John 5:3), we say our path is smooth. Isaiah also has in mind that the path God has placed us on is one of waiting, desiring, and yearning for him. He will not disappoint us. We live in hope (Titus 1:1,2). Christ's yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matthew 11:29). Only the way of the unfaithful is hard (Proverbs 13:15), if we look at how his life ends (Psalm 73).

The text switches from the plural to "my soul" and "my spirit". The city cannot be filled with righteous souls unless as individuals they have been converted to Christ. The Bible emphasizes both the individual and corporate side of our lives as his people. The future picture is every heart beating together in the worship of the Lord. The section has little room to speak of one's circumstances because it is preoccupied with the One they desired, and he is the One Who ordained their particular situations (Psalm 139:16).

How is God known? We do not name God. He tells us his Name and that is what he is! Thus the happy picture here is of people who not only have no other god, because they have the true One. They hold to him as he has revealed himself. This is clear also in the Word 'renown', a word related to God's reputation. The Hebrew word comes from the word 'remember'. God has given us a record of His deeds in Scripture. That is why he is so often prayed to in terms of what he has done: he is the God who made heaven and earth, the God who delivered his people from Egypt, the God who raised Jesus from the dead. True worship is affected by remembering what he has done. God's renown should be the desire of our hearts. We can only learn righteousness from him as we come to know his judgments. "Judgments" here could mean his decisions revealed or his acts revealed. Either way God is known as he shows us himself in his deeds as well as his words of truth.

26:10,11: Sinners will not learn; they cannot see. These two verses deal with the inability of people to accept a message from God. What is shown to them is grace in the sense of favor and kindness, but that does not make a difference. A good surrounding, a land of uprightness, does not make a difference. When in danger of the judgment of God, with his hand lifted high, they have no fear of God before their eyes (Romans 3:18). They are blind to the hand raised up against them. Man is unable to believe, and the church is not able to make men believe. God's people have to admit, "*We have not brought salvation to the earth, we have not given birth to the people of the world*" (v.18). How can anyone be saved? This section prepares us for the answer in vv. 12-15. It is the Lord who saves.

The spiritual inability of sinners In the New Testament we find various statements of what man cannot do by himself: He cannot hear (John 8:43); he cannot come (John 6:44); he cannot submit to God's law (Romans 8:7); he cannot please God (Romans 8:8), and he cannot understand the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). No one can be saved unless he hears, understands, and comes; so if anyone is going to be saved, it is necessary for God to enable man to believe. In other words, it is necessary to be born of the Spirit of God, otherwise one can neither see nor enter (John 3:3,5).

Since man does not learn, goes on doing evil and cannot see, his course to destruction is set, unless God intervenes to change his heart. Blind to God's things in life, they shall finally see when he acts to save his people and consume his enemies with fire. See 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 for God saving his people and having vengeance on those who trouble them. "Fire is the symbol of active divine holiness." (Motyer)

26:12-15 God gives peace God's people could not save themselves from Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon. In most of the Old Testament they were surrounded by nations stronger than they were. Much of the time they were under duress, slavery, exile, occupation or invasion. One great benefit of being so extremely weak before other nations was that their deliverance made clear that it was the Lord, and only the Lord, Who gave them peace. He not only invited, he brought them into their strong city. God alone established peace for them. The translation could be, "Only by You do we keep Your name in remembrance." That emphasis would fit the rest of the chapter well.

The statement "all that we have accomplished you have done for us" tells how man so blind to God, can ever be saved. Without Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5). Other lords like Pharaoh are gone, dead, punished, ruined, wiped out in history, and not remembered. Israel remains because God had covenanted to maintain the children of Abraham. While heathen nations pass away, God enlarges his tiny remnant. This is one of the great themes of Isaiah. (Compare 6:11-13 with 54:2,3). Destroying powerful enemies and saving weak people gains glory for God. If God fought a weak devil, a tiny number of wicked spirits, whose lies were unconvincing to all, with no power over their victims, his salvation would appear to us to be a small thing. God would not have the glory his triumphs bring.

There follows a contrast. First was what God had accomplished, but next is the failure of his people. They are like an exhausted woman, who at the moment of delivery cannot give birth. In Isaiah's words, Israel with so little strength could only deliver wind (v.18).

26:16-19 His people come back. They came either in their distress or because of distress, so weak that their cry for help was a mere whisper. The people of the world did not learn righteousness through them; Israel failed. Israel could not give birth, but God gives life to the dead (Romans 4:17). His dead will rise (v.19). In response to the gospel, we receive Christ and become God's children, but are not born of any human ability, because those who believe are born of God (John 1:12,13). Israel was God's servant (41:8,9) yet was blind and deaf and needed someone to save them. In that setting God presented Christ as his servant (42:1). Thus we see again the huge contrast: failure by God's people and success by the Lord.

The idea of "*your dead*" indicates that those God claims will rise in salvation. Jesus pictures salvation as a resurrection in John 5:24-29. God claims his elect as his before they rise and believe. The Lord referred to Gentiles he would later bring as "I have other sheep..." The Lord told Paul in Acts 18:10, "I have many people in this city," speaking of people not yet converted, so it is not strange for Isaiah to speak of "your dead".

Some say the Old Testament does not speak of a physical resurrection. Yet v.19 does, as does Job 19:26. Man in sin sinks to become dust, just like the lofty city of v.5. But here the reverse takes place; his people who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy.

26:20,21 The chapter opened with a strong city the righteous enter. This section has them hiding behind closed doors while God's wrath comes on the earth. As in the time of the Passover, they are protected from the judgment. They have in the Lord security from his wrath. Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him (John 3:36; Romans 5:9). The verb "passed" is the same one used in Exodus 12:12. The wrath is for sins. The people escaping wrath had sins but they were forgiven. God's wrath fell on their Substitute, just as the blood of the innocent lamb covered them at the first Passover. For all the others, the earth will disclose the murders that caused bloodshed. Sins will be revealed and punished.

Isaiah 27

When Isaiah says “in that day” in both vv.1 & 12, we know that this is a section that goes together.

This is not a statement that there are literally such animals, though Job 40 & 41 does refer to animals whose strength is formidable to man. In 27:1 Leviathan stands for the powers of the heavens above (24:21) – Satan and his angels. In Revelation 12:9 Satan is presented as a dragon. The powerful beast glides, which sounds like it is in the sky. He is also a monster in the sea, a menace to the whole earth.

Our salvation includes deliverance from the devil. Jesus became a man so that by his death he might destroy the devil (Hebrews 2:15,16). God not only punishes the people of the earth (26:21), but also the one who deceived them. This will happen ‘in that day.’ God will take his sword and kill the monster.

27:2-6 The fruitful vineyard Delightful things are matters of song. Here is a vineyard the Lord watches over and protects. (Compare to 5:1-7). It must be productive because he is not angry at it. If threatened by weeds, he will battle against them. he will not allow failure. Strong language shows a high degree of commitment and seriousness. “I am not angry” means he is at peace. Something has caused his peace. We should always wonder what it is that satisfies him.

The great option Those threatening his vineyard will be burned up, or else they may make peace with him. This is a way of giving an invitation. There is no middle ground; there is no third option. God warns of his wrath. Twice God invites to his peace any who would endanger his vineyard; they may come to him for refuge.

In days to come, Israel, who did not bring salvation to the earth (26:18), will do so Its root, bud, blossom and fruit will have a worldwide impact. When the Lord himself comes to be Immanuel, God among us on earth, doing the will of God on earth, the failed-people-Israel will be in Christ a renewed Israel. (In 49:3 Christ is called ‘Israel’). The entire earth will be filled with Israel’s fruit. All this is the opposite of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 that produced only bitter fruit. That was the natural work of Israel; Isaiah 27 gives the supernatural work of God.

Reconciliation The words in v.4 “I am not angry” show a different attitude in God. How is it that he is not angry any more? He has been reconciled, but Isaiah 27 does not spell how; Isaiah 53 does. In 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, we have a message of reconciliation. The word ‘reconciled’ in 2 Corinthians 5:18 is in the past tense, so God’s alienation has been removed already. Such cannot be said of sinners whose alienation against God remains. So Paul speaks of God’s reconciliation to those for whom Christ died. To bring about God’s reconciliation, two related things happened: first, God did not impute their sins to them as we might expect, v.19. And, second, he did impute sins to Christ, which we would never expect, v.21. So the gospel message for those who will accept it, and only the elect will, is that Christ’s work on the cross has already removed God’s enmity against us. He says to his own in Isaiah 27:5, “*Let them come to me for refuge.*” It is God who is angry with sinners for their sin. It is God who in Christ is a refuge from His anger against us for our sin. It is God who has laid on God the Son the iniquity of us all (53:6) so that he could sincerely and effectively offer peace to us all. If you are afraid of the wrath of God, run to God to protect you from God, for in Christ there is refuge and safety from the storm of God’s wrath. Refuge is found there and in no other place. And this can only be so because of what God did in reconciling himself to us in Christ, so that as a result, we could be reconciled to him.

27:7-11 How has God dealt with Israel? He has not treated Israel as her sins deserved, (Psalm 103:10). Egypt and Assyria struck her; God was far more severe with them than with Israel (v.7). With his people he has shown restraint (Jeremiah 5:18).

God chastened his people with a wind that would blow them far away into exile. But exile is not the same as death, and there was also a promise of a return. No nation was allowed to bring them to an end.

In v.9 “by this” may well mean by this same principle of restraint, God would make a difference in their case, and make atonement for them. It tells us Jacob’s sin will be atoned for without telling how. By not saying they would pay, it leaves the probability that it is the Lord who would atone. Isaiah 53 tells us that he has atoned and how.

The thought shifts to the results of the atonement: Jacob will get rid of his altars to idols, and the Asherah poles. The atonement causes Israel to be loyal to the Lord, so the false gods are rejected and their symbols torn down.

That understanding is clear concerning the Asherah poles, but the text does not say that the altar was to a false god. So one *possible* meaning is that all altars, even the Lord’s altar, will be gone. If that is what Isaiah is saying, it looked forward to the sacrifice of Christ. Because of it, there is no more altar; no further sacrifice is ever needed. (See Hebrews 9:27,28; 10:11-14).

27:10 The ‘fortified city’ is the one which fortifies itself yet is destroyed. The ‘strong city’ is the one where God makes salvation its walls. The fortified city is desolate and abandoned, a place for animals, not people. The lack of understanding is their deliberate choice and God may well let people have their own way. This he can do simply by allowing them to go on without him, and they will be without understanding. God shows compassion to whom he wills to show compassion (Romans 9:15). He owes it to no one, yet shows it to many as the next verse clearly shows.

27:12,13 The great gathering. This harvest of saving people happens in Israel (v.12) and in the world (v.13). The boundaries of the land promised to Abraham are given in v.12. (See Genesis 15:18). Threshing is done in order to get the grain or olives and bring them home. The Lord picks up Israelites one by one. Salvation is individual as well as corporate. Not one of those given to Christ will be missing (John 6:39,40; Jeremiah 23:1-6).

Salvation is not limited to the covenant people to whom it was first promised. God has always had in his plan to save Gentiles and to have the whole earth full of the knowledge of the Lord (11:9). So gathering by hand in v.12 yields to a great trumpet to call the nations to come and worship. In Isaiah 11 it was a banner raised up to bring the nations to it. Here as in the Day of Jubilee and the Day of Atonement the trumpet sounds to call the perishing of Assyria and the ones wandering around Egypt to hear and come. God is very gracious.

The Jubilee trumpet was sounded on the Day of Atonement. Related to atonement, it indicated forgiveness; related to Jubilee, it sounded liberty (Leviticus 25:10). Atonement does not have a limited role of merely bringing benefits to those who are saved; its overriding purpose is that it brings us to the worship of God in the way and place that he has ordained.

The trumpet is for gathering God’s people. This chapter opened with a great sword against the Evil One. The last enemy to be defeated is death. That shall occur with the sound of a trumpet at the coming of our Lord for his people, people he will gather to himself and deliver over to his Father. And so shall we ever be with the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:50-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).