

Text: Isaiah 24:1-23

Title: "Isaiah's true tale of two cities"

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Introduction: Brightness is measured in units called lumens. A typical 100-watt lightbulb gives off about 1,600 lumens of light. The sun's brightness has been measured to be 3.57×10^{28} lumens. That is the numbers 3, 5 and 7 followed by 26 zeros. A full moon, which reflects the light of the sun to the earth, is estimated to be about 400,000 times less bright than the sun, but that still equates to something like 89.25×10^{21} lumens (although since the moon does not give off its own light, I am told that using lumens in this case is not really correct). What we do know for sure is that both the sun and the moon give off staggering amounts of light on which our world greatly depends.

Isaiah's message in this chapter concludes with the truth that the brightness of the Lord's glory will one day be a greater light on earth (v. 23). Both the light of the sun and of the moon will be minor lights by comparison. This bright light of the Lord will be caused by His glory, and it will be located in a city Isaiah often calls Zion, the future Jerusalem that the Lord has planned. Revelation 21:23 describes this future Jerusalem in a similar way: "And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."

This future Jerusalem is one of two cities Isaiah mentions in this chapter. If you ask a computer what is the most read book of the English language, it will tell you that it is the Bible, but it will also tell you that Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is also notable, with over 200 million copies sold since it was first published. I have not read the novel, but I do know that the two cities behind the tale are London and

Paris during the days of the French Revolution. At that time, London was a good, safe city, and Paris was a chaotic, dangerous city.

In a similar way, Isaiah's teaching about the glory of God in this passage is a true tale of two cities. We have seen one of the two in verse 23, and there is another city mentioned in vv. 10-12. This city is called the city of confusion by the KJV, the city of chaos by the HCSB and the NASB, the city of ruin by the NIV, and the wasted city by the ESV. I like to translate the Hebrew as "the city of nothing-worthwhile."

The Hebrew word translated these many ways is the word translated *without form* in Genesis 1:1-2, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was *without form* and void." One commentator [Motyer] notes this and translates our phrase here as 'the city without meaning.' He explains his translation this way: "[Isaiah] has in mind the 'global city', the whole world organized on a human-centered, non-spiritual basis. . . the spirit of Babylon is encapsulated in 'the city without meaning.'"

So, this second city is a place that is without form in the same way that creation was without form at the very beginning before God began to form it. In other words, it is a place of material that has no design, no purpose, and so no meaning. These verses indicate that it is a place of isolation and fear ("every house is shut up from entering"). It is a dark city of ruin, without defense. This city is what happens to a place that is untouched by the bright glory of the Lord. Ultimately, a place like this is a place that the Lord must judge.

We will see what Isaiah's message has to say about these two cities under three points this morning. In regard to the first city, we see both God's judgment and His mercy, and in regard to the second city, we see His glory.

I. The Lord's judgment on the first city (vv. 1-12, 17-20).

Illustration: I have a neighbor who is a nurse and hopes to get a job with Mass General in Boston. She has an interview coming up, and she needed my help because her interview is going to be done with a committee via Zoom. She explained that she did not know how to use Zoom, so I had the opportunity to show her the ropes.

Mass General is about 70 miles away, but this interview can happen with my neighbor in her house here in town and the interviewers all those miles away because of the technologies that make Zoom possible. In spite of those miles, it will be like they are in the same room. This new world of technology, which has made our world smaller and more connected, was first called a "global village" in the early 1960s by the author Marshall McLuhan, who wrote some books about understanding media.

Application: Isaiah foresaw this "global village" feature of our modern world in this prophecy, 700 years before the birth of Christ. He refers to a city or village (vv. 10-12), but by that he means the whole earth. In Hebrew, the word translated *earth* (v. 1) and *land* (v. 3) in the KJV is the same word. It often refers to the local land of Israel in the Bible, but in this passage it refers to the whole earth. We know that because it is a synonym for *the world* in verse 4.

Therefore, the first thing we must understand about the Lord's judgment on this first city is that it will be a universal, world-wide judgment. God's judgment on this city is His judgment on the whole "global village." His judgment is universal because man's sin is universal (v. 5). The Apostle Paul is very clear – "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Isaiah tells us that sin is the transgression of God's law, the replacement of God's ordinances,

and the violation of God's everlasting covenant. This gracious covenant is the one ratified by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, which says that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins (Heb. 8:13; 9:22-28). We brake that covenant when we fail to repent of our unbelief and to trust in Christ for our salvation from sin. We do so because we have substituted our opinions for God's truth.

Verse 2 tells us that God's universal judgment treats everyone equally. There is no favoritism in the Lord's just judgments. Everyone is on equally poor footing before our holy God. Verses 7-9 describe how man's pleasures become bitter vices under the judgment of God. Verses 17-18 tells us that none can successfully flee God's universal judgment. We may think we have escaped for a while, but the judgment is still hunting us down and will execute its justice in the end.

God's judgment on our sin will be also a judgment that destroys the earth. God's judgment is very thorough. Isaiah empties his thesaurus as he describes what will happen to the earth and its inhabitants when God judges: make empty, make it a waste, turn upside down, scatter, utterly emptied, utterly spoiled, mourning, fading away, languish, defiled, devour, desolate, burned, utterly broken down, shut up, darkened, clean dissolved, shaken exceedingly, reels like a drunkard, blown around like a garden-booth. It falls, not to rise again, because man's transgressions are heavy on it (v. 20). I believe that it is the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of the seven-year Great Tribulation outlined in Revelation, which will produce the effect Isaiah warns about here.

This is Isaiah's prophecy of the future of the world's global village, which has rejected the glory of the Lord. Isaiah knows his word is true because it comes from the Lord (v. 3). Since God's judgment is this world's future, we must ask Isaiah whether any can survive. He gives us an answer.

II. The Lord's mercy on the first city (vv. 13-16).

Illustration: Oliveknowledge.com tells me that a typical olive tree will produce between 2,500 and 17,500 olives each year. Even today, the way to harvest that many olives off of a tree is to shake the tree until the olives fall off. I saw a video of a machine that lays a huge retractable tarp below a tree. Then another machine reaches over the tarp and shakes the tree. The olives fall off the tree into the tarp, which has grooves to hold the olives, and then the tarp is retrieved to the machine's conveyor belt, and the olives are collected.

Application: The olive harvesters in Isaiah's day did not have that machinery, but they harvested olives with the same principle – shake the trees and collect what falls off. Of course, both then and in modern times, not all the olives fall, no matter how hard you shake. This is what Isaiah uses to illustrate the Lord's mercy on the first city (v. 13). The same is true after the grape harvest. Some grapes are left behind.

The harvests of olives and grapes represent the Lord's judgment of the earth. Most fall in that judgment, but a few are left behind (v. 6). These "few men left" escape the judgment. They make it to the narrow path that leads to life, about which Jesus said, "Few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). Isaiah tells us that after they are saved, they lift up their voice in a song of praise. They shout their praise because they want others to know what God has done, and they do so all over the world after God's judgment ends (vv. 14-16a).

The song gives glory to the Righteous One (16a). Those saved from God's judgment do not glorify Him as the Loving One, but rather as the Righteous One. One commentator noticed this and wrote: "Theologically it is noteworthy that the incoming remnant are primarily aware of the righteousness of the God who has saved them. In other words, his

saving mercies are grounded in the satisfaction of his justice, not in the expression of his love" (Motyer). God is righteous and just in His judgment against sin, and He is righteous and just in His saving mercy for sinners. I believe the latter is true because of what we read in the rest of verse 16.

Isaiah mourns the fact that this joy pertains only to the few (v. 16b). When he does so, he reminds us of both the mourning, the leanness, and the betrayal of our Lord. Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, became lean and was betrayed by the betrayers. It is because the Righteous One did what He did that God's loving mercy is also His righteous mercy.

This is the truth concerning Jesus Christ, about which John wrote: "He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (John 1:10-11). In fact, Isaiah prophesies in his great 53rd chapter that the Messiah would be "despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed Him not" (v. 3). In our chapter, Isaiah identifies with this truth about the Righteous One. He is very lean and very betrayed. I believe that when Isaiah laments this way, He sees the One who would suffer and die for our sins so that we few could be saved.

In light of this suffering, Isaiah begins chapter 53 with a question, "Who hath believed?" John tells us the importance of our answer to that question – "But as many as received Him, to them gave He the power to become the Sons of God, even to those who believe on His name" (John 1:12).

This is God's mercy on the first city. The Righteous One died in the sinner's place to justify those who believe on Him. Do you believe? If so, Isaiah sees that you have the hope of a great future that all believers will share.

III. The Lord's glory in the second city (vv. 21-23).

Application: The Apostle Paul described the spiritual enemies we face every day this way: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). Isaiah knew those enemies. He knew that the world in which we live is the domain of our enemy. He knew the first city.

But Isaiah saw the day when that enemy and all who serve him would be bound in a pit of a prison for many days, after which they would be dealt with once and for all (vv. 21-22). During that time the Lord of Hosts will reign in mount Zion and in Jerusalem. He will do so gloriously before His ancients or elders (v. 23). The Apostle John saw those coming days too (Rev. 20:1-6). After the many days of the 1000-year millennial reign of Christ, these enemies of the Lord will be visited again with the judgment of the Great White Throne.

Conclusion: And so this passage, along with the life of every person who does or does not read it, is truly a tale of these two cities. Some choose to live for the present earth that rejects the promise of heaven in Christ, the Righteous One, and so they lay up treasure on earth while calling this doomed place their home. A few have come to understand, through God's righteous mercy in Christ, what it means to be a pilgrim in this life, with their affections set on things above, living to lay up treasure in their heavenly home.

Which life and which future have you chosen this morning? Choose correctly, and the songs of the remnant of Isaiah's olive tree can become your song too – songs like William How's "For All the Saints":

1 For all the saints who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed;

Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

2 Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress and their Might;

Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;

Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

3 O blest communion, fellowship divine!

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;

Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

4 And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,

Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,

And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

5 But then there breaks a still more glorious day:

The saints triumphant rise in bright array;

The King of glory passes on His way.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

6 From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,

Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,

In praise of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

"A man came — I think it was actually in Philadelphia — on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons.

Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction — the sermon, and the

'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

— David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching