

A Brief Commentary on Isaiah 24:1–27:5

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Introduction

The biblical writers share a number of important common themes in how they teach or prophesy about the future of the world and humanity. A survey of the Psalms, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, and Revelation, will reveal that the following major themes come to the fore:

- God is going to come in glory with his Messiah (identified as Jesus in the NT) to judge the whole world and to transform and renew the creation.
- The violent and the unjust will band together to oppose the coming of God (and his Messiah), but they will be completely removed from the earth.¹
- God’s glorious coming will signal massive upheavals in the creation as we know it.
- God and his Messiah will determine who is worthy to take part in the glorious reign in the renewed creation.
- Even those among the dead who are found worthy will be brought to life again, so that all the faithful in all of humanity’s history will enjoy the glorious ages to come.²

We’re going to see that Isaiah 24–27 brings forth every one of these themes. Whereas many prophecies or sayings touch on one or the other of them, this passage practically tells the story of “the end” from start to finish. And it points to a unique answer to the question of how the judgment that occurs when God comes in glory with his Messiah Jesus—which sends the unrepentant to (or leaves them in) Hades—relate to the eventual “body and soul” destruction of the unrepentant in “Gehenna” (Mt. 10:28 || Lk. 12:4-5). After all, Jesus ties Gehenna to the prophecy in Isaiah 66 of *a divinely-thwarted siege of the New Jerusalem in the new creation*. There are some extra pieces of biblical information that do not fit into the familiar versions of the end-times picture puzzle. Isaiah 24–27, known as “the Isaiah Apocalypse,” is going to find a meaningful place for all of them.

Before I begin my commentary, it would be good, if you can, to patiently and prayerfully read Isaiah 24:1–27:5 through in your own Bible. It won’t be easy, but it’s worth putting some effort into it. Too many Bible readers get impatient and skim over portions that are not immediately easy to understand. They slip into the

¹ On this particular theme, which appears multiple times in the Psalms, the Prophets, the Epistles, and Revelation, Jesus says almost nothing in the Gospels (but see Mt. 22:6-7; Lk. 19:14, 27).

² The theme of resurrection does not appear explicitly in the Psalms.

unnoticed assumption that OT prophecy is mostly a collection of mumbo-jumbo that no one can understand unless someone in the NT quotes something and explains it. *Jesus and the apostles would never have taught anyone to think like that.* To them, the OT *is* the Bible. It is revelation from God, which deserves to be studied diligently on its own merits. As Peter says,

2 Pet. 1:19-21

¹⁹And so we have all the more confidence in the message of the prophets. You'll do well to keep your attention on it: use it like a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in your hearts.³

²⁰Here's the first point to understand: none of the prophecies of scripture come out of⁴ somebody's own interpretation. ²¹Because prophecy never came by human will. No, it happened when people, carried along by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God.

Let's read Isaiah together with this attitude. As we go I will be listing closely related passages in the Book of Revelation, so you can see how consistently and intimately connected Revelation is to this passage. Let's begin.

Isa. 24:1-3

See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth
and devastate it;

he will ruin its surface⁵

and scatter its inhabitants—

² it will be the same

for priest as for people,

for the master as for his servant,

for the mistress as for her servant,

for seller as for buyer,

for borrower as for lender,

for debtor as for creditor.

³ The earth will be completely laid waste
and totally plundered.

The LORD has spoken this word.

Rev. 6:14; 16:18, 20

Rev. 6:15; 19:18

Verse 1 is describing total upheaval of the physical world associated with God's coming in glory to judge and reign (see v. 23). So this is no ordinary natural disaster. It's not something that those higher on the economic and social status ladder can protect themselves from more easily than the poor. This moment is going to affect

³ Lit. "...hearts, knowing this first:"

⁴ Or "are a matter of."

⁵ NIV has "face."

everyone on earth equally, no matter what their station in life. All of sinful humanity is going to be shaken out of the earth like dust being shaken out of a rug.

Isa. 24:4-6

⁴ The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,
the heavens languish with the earth.

⁵ The earth is defiled by its people;
they have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes

Rev. 19:2

and broken the everlasting covenant.

Rev. 11:18f

⁶ Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt.

Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up,
and very few are left.

Rev. 16:8-9

Why has God shaken the whole earth so hard that it flings all the human beings from its surface (v. 1)? Verses 4-6 explain why God is going to shake the earth in this way. It is because the earth is drying up and withering, even the skies (v. 4). And why is that? Because of the way people have behaved on the earth (v. 5). They have defiled the earth—which means, they have polluted it. They've broken God's laws and instructions. Worst of all, they have "broken the everlasting covenant," the covenant that God made with Noah when Noah and his family came out of the ark after the flood. At that time, when human beings had only been in existence on earth for a bare ten generations, the earth had become so "filled with violence because of them" (Gen. 6:11-13) that God had to strip humanity back to a tiny root and start over in order to save the earth from destruction at the hands of the human race. God promises Noah that he will never again send a flood to destroy the earth, and he calls this promise "an everlasting covenant." He makes this covenant with Noah and with all living creatures on the earth (Gen. 9:12-16). Every covenant contains responsibilities for each of the parties. God states his side explicitly: he will never again destroy the earth with a universal flood. Humanity's responsibility under this everlasting covenant is left implicit: humanity must never again destroy and "ruin" the earth (see Gen. 6:11-13). In Noah's day, humanity had so corrupted itself, and even the whole life system of the earth, that God was forced to destroy not only humanity, but all major lifeforms. The flood was a desperate intervention, because if God had not intervened,⁶ humanity would have killed itself, taking the whole life system of the earth down with it.

⁶ NIV wrongly translates the words of God to Noah in Gen. 6:13 as "I am going to put an end to all people." In Hebrew, the text literally says, "The end of all flesh has come before my face." God doesn't say that he plans to kill everyone.

In Isa. 24:4-6, Isaiah is prophesying that humanity will eventually get to the point of global murder-suicide a second time, forcing God to intervene again. As Jesus himself prophesies, “If that time weren’t cut short, not one living soul would be saved” (Mt. 24:22 || Mk 13:20). And a few verses later he says, “It will be like in Noah’s days when the Human One comes” (Mt. 24:37 || Lk. 17:26). This time, however, it will not be with a flood, as in Noah’s day. This time, “heaven and earth will pass away” (Mt. 24:35 || Mk 13:31 || Lk. 21:33), being burned up with fire (Isa. 24:6 above, and 2 Pet. 3:6-13).⁷ The “few who are left” (Isa. 24:6) are the few who are faithful to God.

Isa. 24:7-12

- ⁷ The new wine dries up and the vine withers;
all the merrymakers groan.
- ⁸ The joyful timbrels are stilled, Rev. 18:22
the noise of the revelers has stopped,
the joyful harp is silent.
- ⁹ No longer do they drink wine with a song;
the beer is bitter to its drinkers.
- ¹⁰ The ruined city lies desolate; Rev. 18:23
the entrance to every house is barred.
- ¹¹ In the streets they cry out for wine;
all joy turns to gloom,
all joyful sounds are banished from the earth.
- ¹² The city is left in ruins, Rev. 18:21
its gate is battered to pieces.

Isaiah is describing a total drought leading to a total famine condition. All the normal human experiences and activities, so taken for granted by a godless world, come to a grinding halt.

Isa. 24:13

- ¹³ So will it be on the earth
and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten, Rev. 14:14-20
or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest.

He says that he, as Creator and Judge, must decide what to do about the fact that all life on earth is about to end due to the violence of humanity.

⁷ Peter, like Jesus, compares the coming crisis of humanity, leading to the removal of all the ungodly and the total transformation of the creation, to Noah’s flood (2 Pet. 3:6-7).

This statement, using similes from the harvesting of olives⁸ and grapes, continues the idea of v. 6. All of humanity—with the exception of the faithful, who represent a small minority—will perish.⁹

Isa. 24:14-16a

¹⁴ They raise their voices, they shout for joy;
from the west they acclaim the LORD's majesty. Rev. 19:6

¹⁵ Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD;
exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel,
in the islands of the sea.

^{16a} From the ends of the earth we hear singing:
"Glory to the Righteous One." Rev. 15:1-4

All over the world—east, west, the furthest islands, the ends of the earth—the faithful are celebrating. How can they celebrate when all of humanity is perishing? Because God's intervention is good news to them: God is their rescuer, their faithful and just Savior. They are singing a psalm like Psalm 96:

Ps. 96:1-2, 13

¹ Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth. Rev. 14:2-3

² Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation... Rev. 15:2-4

¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth. Rev. 11:15-18

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Isa. 24:16b-18a

^{16b} But I said, "I waste away, I waste away!
Woe to me!
The treacherous betray! Rev. 17:12-16
With treachery the treacherous betray!"

¹⁷ Terror and pit and snare await you,
people of the earth. Rev. 13:10

¹⁸ Whoever flees at the sound of terror

⁸ The beating is to shake off the ripe olives.

⁹ This is one of the passages that I call *the hard scriptures*. When Jesus is asked (based on scriptures like this and others in Isaiah such as 10:22; 13:12) whether only a few people are going to be saved, he doesn't deny it. He says, "Try your hardest to go in through the narrow doorway. Because I'm telling you, a lot of people are going to try to go in, and they're not going to be able to" (Lk. 13:24). And in Mt. 7:14 he says, "The gate that leads to life is very narrow, and the path that leads to life is very tight, and only a few people find it."

will fall into a pit;
whoever climbs out of the pit
will be caught in a snare.

Isaiah was just feeling lightness and joy as he heard the faithful around the world celebrating God's arrival as their righteous King, Savior, and Judge. But now he is overwhelmed with grief and horror. In his vision, something terrible is happening on the earth. The greatest act of treachery in the history of humanity is taking place, which will destroy all the godless. I believe Isaiah is receiving a hint of what John sees in some detail in his Patmos visions. The "beast" of Revelation 13, after essentially taking over the entire world as emperor of "Babylon the Great," in the last few weeks before Jesus comes in glory, switches loyalties and makes a treasonous alliance with Babylon's enemies (Rev. 17:12). He works with them to completely destroy Babylon—his own country—with fire (17:15-18), then he leads them and all their people on the suicide mission of fighting against Jesus as he comes in glory (Rev. 16:13-16; 17:14; 19:11-21). It's a horrible end for the godless of the earth.

Isa. 24:18b-20

^{18b} The floodgates of the heavens are opened, the foundations of the earth shake.	Rev. 16:21 Rev. 6:14; 16:18, 20
¹⁹ The earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is violently shaken.	
²⁰ The earth reels like a drunkard, it sways like a hut in the wind; so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion that it falls—never to rise again.	Rev. 20:11

This is the end for humanity, and the end of life on earth. Humanity's attacks on the life systems of the earth have become too much to bear. The earth itself perishes.

Isa. 24:21-23

²¹ In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below.	Rev. 12:3, 7-9; 20:1-3 Rev. 19:19-21
²² They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison	Rev. 1:18; 9:1; 20:1

and be punished¹⁰ after many days. Rev. 20:7-10
²³ The moon will be dismayed,
the sun ashamed; Rev. 21:23; 22:5
for the LORD Almighty will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
and before its elders—with great glory. Rev. 21:1-3, 11

When God comes to reign in glory, all of the godless will perish along with the earth, and all of their exalted rulers—whether earthly and visible and human, or heavenly and invisible and angelic¹¹—will be incarcerated, every bit as powerless as everyone else, in the “pit” of the underworld.¹² As of that moment, the power of godless humans and angelic beings to do harm in creation will be *zero*.¹³ But that is not the end of the story for them. “And after many days¹⁴ they will be visited,” says v. 22, translated literally. In other words, after they have served out a long sentence of incarceration in the underworld of the dead, God will decide their ultimate fate.

Meanwhile, in the land of the living, God’s glory will be so bright that it will put the sun and the moon in the shade (v. 23a). As always in the Psalms and the Prophets, Mount Zion will be the capital of God’s kingdom.

Isa. 25:1-5

^{25:1} LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done wonderful things,
things planned long ago.
² For you have made the city a heap of rubble, Rev. 18:21-23
the fortified town a ruin;
the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt. Rev. 19:3
³ Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.
⁴ You have been a refuge for the poor,

¹⁰ NIV translators’ note: Or *released*. The verb here is *pāqad* (Strong’s #H6485), which literally means “to visit.” In contexts like this in the Hebrew Old Testament, it refers to the coming of divine judgment or punishment. So if they are to be “released,” it will be to face trial.

¹¹ For hidden angelic powers who are oriented against God and the faithful, see Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 2:6-8; Eph. 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 2:15.

¹² Sheol (Heb. *she’ōl*, Strong’s #H7585), the underworld of the dead, and “the pit” (Heb. *bōr*, Strong’s #H953) are typically treated as synonymous in the OT. See Isa. 14:15, 19; 24:22; 38:18.

¹³ Those who understand Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 as referring to the defeat of the devil ought to see a strong parallel here (Isa. 24:21–22 || Isa. 14:5–20 || Ezek. 28:1–19 || Rev. 20:1–3). For the idea that unrepentant angelic beings will be subjected to the same fate as human beings, see Mt. 25:41.

¹⁴ The LXX has “and after many generations,” implying hundreds of years, as opposed to a few years or decades.

a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall
⁵ and like the heat of the desert.

You silence the uproar of foreigners; Rev. 16:12-16; 19:19-21
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

Isaiah bursts out in a psalm of praise to God, who has come to reign in glory. The capital city of the ruthless empire that had been oppressing the faithful and the poor lies ruined, flattened to a pile of rubble—never to be rebuilt again. The relief of God’s rescue from the oppression of the godless will be instant and complete—like being given shelter from a roaring storm, or like the moment a thick cloud passes over the sun on a burning hot day.

Isa. 25:6-10

⁶ On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples, Mt. 8:11 || Lk. 13:29
a banquet of aged wine— Rev. 19:9
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy Rev. 14:1; 21:10
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations; Rev. 21:1-3

⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Rev. 21:4; 22:2, 5

The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces; Rev. 7:17; 21:3

he will remove his people’s disgrace
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

⁹ In that day they will say,
“Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us. Rev. 19:1, 6

This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.” Rev. 19:7

^{10a} The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain. Rev. 21:3, 22

Jesus is referring specifically to this passage when he says that “lots of people are going to come from the East and from the West and eat the banquet dinner with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Heaven’s Reign” (Mt. 8:11). When God’s glorious

reign (Isa. 24:23) comes to the earth, its subjects are going to be the faithful of all nations, ethnicities, and languages. For those invited to take part in God's kingdom, there will a great celebration of God's intimate presence and saving love. In God's kingdom, there will no longer be a veil between God and humanity; no longer will heaven, God's dwelling, be separate from earth. No longer will there be any source of grief. For the faithful, God's glorious coming will have brought a permanent end not only to cruelty and injustice and persecution, but even to death itself. Jesus reveals the same reality to John in Revelation:

Rev. 21:1-4

And I saw a renewed heaven, and a renewed earth: the first heaven and the first earth had gone away, and the sea wasn't there anymore. ²And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. She was all dressed up, like a bride all ready for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying,

Look! God's home is with humanity!
He is going to live with them,
And they're going to be his people,
And God himself, their God, is going to be with them.
⁴God is going to wipe every tear from their eyes,
And death will no longer exist.
Nor will grief, nor crying, nor pain, exist any longer,
Because the previous things are gone.

Isa. 25:10b-12

^{10b} But Moab will be trampled in their land
as straw is trampled down in the manure.
¹¹ They will stretch out their hands in it,
as swimmers stretch out their hands to swim.
God will bring down their pride
despite the cleverness of their hands.
¹² He will bring down your high fortified walls
and lay them low;
he will bring them down to the ground,
to the very dust.

Isa. 25:2; Rev. 18:21-23

Godless enemy nations, who used to pose a constant threat to the people of God, will not be making an appearance at this banquet, nor will they pose any danger to the faithful. Symbolically speaking, it will be as though they are outside, swimming around in the cesspit of their own waste (vv. 10b-11).

Isa. 26:1-3

^{26:1} In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

We have a strong city;

God makes salvation

its walls and ramparts.

Isa. 54:11-12; Rev. 21:18-20

² Open the gates

Rev. 21:24-27

that the righteous nation may enter,

the nation that keeps faith.

³ You will keep in perfect peace

those whose minds are steadfast,

because they trust in you.

This is the New Jerusalem, the wonderful dwelling place that is “prepared by God” (Jn 14:1-4; Heb. 11:14-16). As we saw in Rev. 21:1-4 above, it “comes down from heaven” and so it is not built by human hands (see also Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 12:12). It is the everlasting home of all faithful people, and its security, which comes from God alone, is complete. Its citizens rest in perfect peace of mind, because they trust in God as their defender.

Isa. 26:4-6

⁴ Trust in the LORD forever,

for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.

⁵ He humbles those who dwell on high,

he lays the lofty city low;

Isa. 25:2; Rev. 18:21-23

he levels it to the ground

and casts it down to the dust.

⁶ Feet trample it down—

the feet of the oppressed,

the footsteps of the poor.

Isaiah now calls on those who read his prophecy to trust in the LORD, because he is the Eternal One. He will accomplish what has been promised (Isa. 25:1-2). The day will certainly come when he lifts you up, and turns those who have oppressed you to dust under your feet. This moment of salvation has been planned from eternity.

Isa. 26:7-9

⁷ The path of the righteous is level;

you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth.

⁸ Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws,¹⁵

we wait for you;

Rev. 14:12

¹⁵ NIV footnote: Or *judgments*.

your name and renown
are the desire of our hearts.

⁹ My soul yearns for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit longs for you.

When your judgments come upon the earth,
the people of the world learn righteousness. Rev. 1:7; Phil. 2:9-11

Isaiah again turns to praise and prayer in response to the revelation he is being given. He believes that God holds the faithful on the right path for them, no matter what the circumstances (v. 7). His mind is stayed on God; his heart and his soul are fixed on the moment when God will come in glory to teach the entire world the principles of justice and righteousness.

Isa. 26:10-11

¹⁰ But when grace is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness. Isa. 27:2-5; 57:15-21

In the land of integrity they do evil,
and do not see the majesty of the LORD.¹⁶

¹¹ LORD, your hand is lifted high,
but they do not see it.

Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame;
let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them. Heb. 10:27; Rev. 20:9

We read in Isaiah 24 that all of the godless, both human and angelic, are going to be taught a lesson about what's right and wrong when God comes in glory as Judge and Ruler of creation. They will be confronted with the fact that their lawlessness has resulted in the destruction of the earth (26:9, looking back on 24:5-6). At the inauguration of God's glorious rule, they are all going to be banished from the earth and imprisoned together in "the pit," to be dealt with "after many days" (Isa. 24:2, 21-22; see similarly Isa. 14:15). In Isa. 26:10-11 we read of a time when the wicked will receive God's grace (v. 10a), apparently in the context of the peaceful and secure reign of God (26:1-6). Remarkably, they have not learned from their painful confrontation with the truth, nor from their long incarceration, nor from the grace of being granted release from prison of the underworld. In a word, they have not repented.

It appears (v. 10c) that they have it in mind to try the same destructive ways they had habitually followed before, right here in God's glorious kingdom. They get ready to attack "the strong city," whose walls are defended by God himself (26:1-3), but they're not going to get a chance to lay a finger on God's beloved. Whereas

¹⁶ I prefer my own literal translation of this sentence. NIV has, less literally, "even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil, and do not regard the majesty of the LORD."

the faithful sang and celebrated when they experienced “the majesty of the LORD” (24:14), these self-blinded ones “do not see the majesty of the LORD” (26:10d).¹⁷ Nor will they see the LORD’s hand when it is raised to strike them before they can do any harm whatsoever to the beloved city. Their destruction will come as suddenly and totally as it came on Sodom and Gomorrah. Fire will evaporate them.

Isa. 26:12-13

- ¹² LORD, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done for us.
¹³ LORD our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,
but your name alone do we honor. Rev. 2:3, 13; 3:8; 12:11; 15:2-4

Yet again (see 25:1-3; 26:3, 7-9) Isaiah turns to prayer in response to what has been revealed to him. He prays about the fact that most of what the faithful experience in this age is oppression by the powerful and the wicked. He commits himself to remain faithful along with all those who honor God’s name.

Isa. 26:14-15

- ¹⁴ They have died, they are not alive;
their spirits will not rise. Rev. 20:5
You have visited them [for judgment] and destroyed them;
you have caused all memory of them to perish.¹⁸
¹⁵ You have enlarged the nation, LORD;
you have enlarged the nation.
You have gained glory for yourself;
you have extended all the borders of the land.

The ones who have died (v. 14) are those who, up to the point when God intervened in Isaiah 24, had possessed the upper hand in the world—especially “the kings of the earth,” who used to oppress God’s people (v. 13, see also 24:21). When God came in glory as judge, God “visited them” for judgment,¹⁹ removing them from the earth and sending them to the prison of the underworld. Since the inauguration of God’s glorious reign, no one has had the slightest thought of them anymore, let alone anxiety over the danger they once posed.

¹⁷ Isaiah uses two very closely related words for “majesty” in 24:12 and here in 26:10. They are *ga’own* (Strong’s #1347) and *ga’ah* (Strong’s #1342).

¹⁸ This is my slightly more literal translation of v. 14. NIV has “They are now dead, they live no more; their spirits do not rise. You punished them and brought them to ruin; you wiped out all memory of them.”

¹⁹ The Hebrew word “visit” (*paqad*, Strong’s #H6485) is often used in the OT as a euphemistic figure of speech. A similar expression in English would be to speak of God coming to “deal with” somebody. It carries this sense five times in this larger section (Isa. 24–27): see Isa. 24:21, 22; 26:14, 21; 27:1.

Isa. 26:16-17a

¹⁶ LORD, they came to you in their distress;
when you disciplined them,
they could barely whisper a prayer,²⁰

¹⁷ As a pregnant woman about to give birth
writhes and cries out in her pain.

1 Thess. 5:3

When God came in glory to judge the world and to reign (24:21-23), the powerful and the violent found themselves helpless and in distress, and could only plead for mercy. Their arrogance was turned upside down.

Isa. 26:17b-19

^{17b} so were we in your presence, LORD.

¹⁸ We were with child, we writhed in labor,
but we gave birth to wind.

We have not brought salvation to the earth, Mt. 24:21-22; Mk 13:20
and the people of the world have not come to life.

¹⁹ But your dead will live, LORD; Lk. 20:35; Rev. 20:4
their bodies will rise—

let those who dwell in the dust

wake up and shout for joy— 1 Thess. 4:13

your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.

The fortunes of the faithful and the violent oppressors were reversed when God came in glory to judge the world and put all things to rights (Isa. 24:21–25:5). The faithful had been in distress—indeed, they had been near to complete despair. Not only were they unable to bring forth God’s salvation on the earth; they couldn’t even save themselves (vv. 17b-18). But God’s coming brings salvation to the faithful, even resurrection! Those who rise to join in God’s glorious kingdom will be as fresh and new as the morning dew on the fields (v. 19). Isaiah now realizes that God will not simply put an end to death for those few who survive to take part in God’s glorious kingdom; God will put an end to death for all the faithful—including those who have already died!

Isa. 26:20-21

²⁰ Go, my people, enter your rooms
and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while

²⁰ Literally: LORD, in trouble they came to you; they poured out a prayer; your discipline was upon them. NIV translators’ footnote: The meaning of the Hebrew for this clause is uncertain.

until his wrath has passed by.

Rev. 20:8-9

²¹ See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.

The earth will disclose the blood shed on it;
the earth will conceal its slain no longer.

Isa. 66:22-24

This passage seems to reveal the scene of protection and confrontation that we saw in 26:10-11 again from a different angle, this time from the point of view of God, who gently directs his people (this word is singular), “the righteous nation,” whose citizens live in the new Zion (26:1-3), to go into their inner rooms and shut the door. God has some unpleasantness to deal with, but they needn’t fear or worry at all. God is going to destroy, once and for all, those who persist in making themselves his enemies and the enemies of his beloved. This time there will not be burial and eventual resurrection. That is all past now. Their judgment and destruction will take place out in the open, on the bare ground (see Isa. 66:22-24).

Isa. 27:1

¹ In that day,
the LORD will punish with his sword—
his fierce, great and powerful sword—
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;²¹
he will slay the monster of the sea.

Job 26:13; Rev. 20:2

Leviathan, in literal terms, is probably the sperm whale—huge, ferocious, fearless, and pretty much invincible in the minds of the ancients (Job 41:1-34; Ps. 104:26). But in the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia of the 3rd millennium BCE, Leviathan is the seven-headed cosmic sea serpent who represents the most fundamental forces of evil, chaos, and danger.²² In Ps. 74:12-14, the psalmist praises God’s triumph over Leviathan in the creation of the world:



Ps. 74:10-14

¹⁰ How long will the enemy mock you, God?
Will the foe revile your name forever?

¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Isa. 26:11

²¹ The Hebrew word Leviathan is actually formed from the verb “to coil,” which Isaiah uses to describe him.

²² The image to the right shows two gods spearing a seven-headed monster. It is a photo of an impression taken from a 3rd millenium BCE cylinder seal excavated from the ruins of the city of Eshnunna, in modern-day Iraq. Eshnunna was an important city in the time of Abraham, and was located a little over 200 miles north of Ur, Abraham’s birthplace. Photo Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

- Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!
- ¹² But God is my King from long ago;
he brings salvation on the earth.
- ¹³ It was you who split open the sea by your power; Gen. 1:6-7
you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
- ¹⁴ It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.
- ¹⁵ It was you who opened up springs and streams;
you dried up the ever-flowing rivers.
- ¹⁶ The day is yours, and yours also the night; Gen. 1:8
you established the sun and moon. Gen. 1:14-18
- ¹⁷ It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; Gen. 1:9-10
you made both summer and winter.

When God brought order and life out of the original watery chaos in the very beginning (Gen. 1:1-10), Leviathan the sea monster was symbolically defeated. He was symbolically defeated again in the defeat of Egypt, the oldest and deadliest of Israel's enemies: compare Ps. 74:13-14 with Isa. 51:9-10; Ps. 87:4; 89:9-13, which use his other name, Rahab.²³ But Leviathan has never been completely defeated, and always presents a lurking, deadly danger. In Isa. 27:1 Isaiah prophesies that the day on which God finally and permanently removes the threat of human enemies (26:20-21 || 26:10-11) will also be the day on which he finally and permanently slays Leviathan. On that day, all evil and danger—both human and cosmic—will come to an end.

Isa. 27:2-5

- ² In that day—
“Sing about a fruitful vineyard: Isa. 5:1, 7; Mt. 21:33 par.
³ I, the LORD, watch over it;
I water it continually.
I guard it day and night
so that no one may harm it. Isa. 26:11-12
⁴ I am not angry.
If only there were briars and thorns confronting me!
I would march against them in battle;
I would set them all on fire. Isa. 26:10, 20; Rev. 20:9
⁵ Or else let them come to me for refuge;
let them make peace with me,
yes, let them make peace with me.” Isa. 57:19

²³ This name is spelled differently in Hebrew than the name of Rahab, the woman of Jericho (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:17, 25).

Just as we saw in Isa. 26:20-21, the final confrontation with the enemies of God's people is revealed from God's point of view and in God's voice. God's vineyard is his beloved people (Isa. 5:1-7; 27:6), now redeemed and under God's constant nurture and watchful protection (vv. 3-4a). The vineyard represents the blessed Jerusalem of God's glorious reign (25:6-10a; 26:1-4, 12, 20).

It's surprising how gently God speaks to those who might have an idea to attack the beloved vineyard. I am not angry, says God; I have nothing against you (v. 4a). But if you really insist on coming against my people, do what you're going to do.²⁴ Just be warned: I will make anyone who attacks them disappear in a ball of flame like a pile of thorny weeds. God follows this dire warning with a heartfelt invitation (v. 5): Don't throw your life away—come under my protection too! Be reconciled to me! Be reconciled to me! These are the last words God will ever say to those who will simply never repent (Isa. 26:9-11; 57:15-21).

Summary of Isaiah 24–27

What we have just read in these four chapters of Isaiah is a uniquely detailed story of the end of the world. It's a story that is echoed over and over in teachings of Jesus and in the NT, but above all in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. Here is the story in outline form:

1. The end of this world, this age of history, will come when humanity manages to destroy its own living environment, the ecosystem of the earth. Humanity's toxic and covenant-breaking practices are destined to cause the whole world to wither and burn up (Isa. 24:4-7a). This is echoed in various places in the Book of Revelation, especially Rev. 11:18, in which the end of this age happens when God comes as king and judge to "destroy those who destroy the earth."
2. In this crisis, God is going to intervene on behalf of those who have lived faithfully. They will be rescued (Isa. 24:14-16a; 25:4-5, 9; 26:4-6). The songs of praise from "the ends of the earth" (24:16) find an echo in the words of Jesus from the Olivet Discourse: "He'll gather together his chosen ones from the four winds—from the far end of the earth to the far end of the sky"²⁵ (Mk 13:27).
3. God's intervention will inaugurate his glorious reign on a healed earth, and all the faithful of all time are going to be honored guests at a great royal banquet that signals the end of death, crying, and pain. They will be rescued if they are living when God comes to reign, and they will be resurrected if they have died

²⁴ Verse 4b has the form of a question, "Will someone bring me briers and thorns?" But it is probably to be read as an invitation (compare 2 Sam. 23:15, which has the same grammatical form).

²⁵ Or "to the far end of heaven."

beforehand (Isa. 24:23; 25:4-10a; 26:1-3, 15, 19). Jesus refers to this banquet when he says, “I’m telling you, lots of people are going to come from the East and from the West and eat the banquet dinner²⁶ with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Heaven’s Reign” (Mt. 8:11).

4. At the moment when God comes to reign, the unrepentant who are living on the earth, together with the angelic powers that have been unfaithful to their commission to guide and help humanity, will be removed from the earth, and they will be consigned to imprisonment together in the underworld for a long time (Isa. 24:17-23; see Ps. 82). Jesus speaks of this judgment in Mt. 25:41, when he says, “Then he [Jesus] will say to the ones on his left, ‘Get away from me, all of you cursed ones! Go away into the age-long²⁷ fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”
5. The unrepentant who have died before God comes to reign *will not* be raised when the faithful are raised. They will remain imprisoned in the underworld with those who have just joined them in the world-transition crisis (Isa. 26:14, 16-17a; compare 24:21-22). This is reflected in the NT phrase “resurrection from among the dead,” (Lk. 20:35; Phil. 3:11) and is specifically paralleled by Rev. 20:5, which says that “the rest of the dead didn’t come to life until the thousand years were over.”
6. At some point a long time (“many days”) *after* God’s reign has come and the new age of resurrection life has dawned on the earth, those human and angelic beings who have been imprisoned (Isa. 24:21-22) will receive God’s clemency and will be given their freedom. Far from accepting the gift of release from the prison of death through resurrection with joy and gratitude, they will amass in greed and self-deception to attack God’s peaceful people in the New Jerusalem (Isa. 26:9b-12, 20-21; 27:1-5; cf. Isa. 66:22-24). The author of Hebrews points to Isaiah’s picture of the final judgment and destruction of the unrepentant in Heb. 10:27, when he warns that those who spurn God’s grace in Jesus Christ must face “only the terrible expectation of judgment, and *a furious fire that’s going to consume the enemies.*” The italicized words are a direct quotation of Isa. 26:11 LXX.

What’s striking about this last point is that God insists that he holds no built-up resentment against these would-be attackers of his people. As far as God is concerned, they are free to start afresh and enjoy his love and protection. They truly have a clean slate. But they do not change from their destructive and self-delusional ways. They charge blindly into a fire that consumes them completely (Isa. 27:2-4 ||

²⁶ Lit. “come and lie down with Abraham...” Moderns sit to eat at a banquet; people of Jesus’ day reclined. “The banquet” is supplied to help bring forward the reference to Isa. 25:6.

²⁷ Traditionally: “eternal,” here and in v. 46.

Isa. 26:10-11). Isa. 27:2-4 reveals a profound and shocking truth: that the ultimate destruction of the unrepentant does not come because God refuses to let them repent. It's just the opposite. Their destruction comes because they prove themselves to be irreconcilable enemies despite God's offer of total amnesty and a new leaf. God's mercy reaching out towards incorrigibly evil people is one of Isaiah's unique prophetic themes, and we encounter it again in another oracle:

Isa. 57:15-19

- ¹⁵ For this is what the high and exalted One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.
¹⁶ I will not accuse them forever,
nor will I always be angry,
for then they would faint away because of me—
the very people I have created.
¹⁷ I was angry because of their sinful greed;²⁸
I punished them, and hid my face in anger,
yet they kept on in their willful ways.
¹⁸ I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;
I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners,
¹⁹ creating praise on their lips.
Peace, peace, to those far and near,”
says the LORD. “And I will heal them.”
²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
which cannot rest,
whose waves cast up mire and mud.
²¹ “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Isaiah reveals here and in Isa. 27:1-5 one of the deepest and saddest mysteries of God's creation. The thing that gives rise to the ultimate destruction of the unrepentant is not, after all, any lack of love for them on God's part, nor does it stem from any lack of divine patience and mercy, or a mysterious decision not to choose them. *Their perdition results from their adamant refusal to accept God's mercy and take part constructively in his creation.*

²⁸ For some reason NIV translators render this phrase as “I was enraged by their sinful greed,” but there is no good reason to use the out-of-control-sounding word “enraged.” The very same Hebrew word for anger occurs in 57:16 and twice in 57:17.