

# Death Swallowed Up Forever

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**Bible Text:** Isaiah 25:1-8; Isaiah 26:1-5

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Isaiah 25 and we're going to read verses 1 through the end of verse 8 and then I'd like to read the first five verses of chapter 26. So keep your Bibles open and let's begin reading Isaiah 25, beginning at the very first verse through the end of verse 8.

1 O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. 2 For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the foreigners' palace is a city no more; it will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. 4 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; for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, 5 like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners; as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down.

And notice verses 6, 7 and 8 very carefully.

6 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. 7 And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. 8 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.

This is God's word to God's people. Let us bow our heads and as we bow our heads, someone might say, "This has absolutely nothing to say to me," but as we look at God's word for the next few minutes, would you be willing to ask God to show you if he does have something to say to you today, would you ask him that as we pray?

*Triune God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, as we listen with open hearts before your word, may you be pleased to help us feel the gentle heart of the Father, would you help us to see the saving power of Jesus Christ, the Son, and may we experience all of this through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit for Christ and through him we pray. Amen.*

Did you notice in our text that the prophet Isaiah is speaking of two cities? Did you catch that? Isaiah speaks of one city being what he called the lofty city, the lofty city. Isaiah said the lofty city will be brought to ruin but then he mentions another city, the strong city. The strong city remains and flourishes. Two cities, the lofty city and the strong city. It's interesting in the book of Isaiah the theme of city or cities runs throughout the book. At least 60 times Isaiah mentions city or cities.

Now I know it's hard for us country folk to think properly about the city, right? We're country folk, you know, we're out here in Bullitt County and the city is a place where many of us have, we've moved away from the city to get away from it. I grew up in the middle of the 1950s in the city of Louisville. I lived on Market Street with my parents. My mother ran a cleaners and we lived in the back. We lived right downtown, Market Street. My playground was the city sidewalks and after a few years we began to migrate. We moved out into what they called at that time the suburbs. We moved out behind the old Preston Drive In on Old Fern Valley Road, then in 1967, my parents and I moved to the Promised Land, Bullitt County, getting further all the while from the city. It was during that time that people were try to move out and get away from the city and, you know, it has left a strong impression that the city is a bad place but I want to remind you the Bible speaks very positively about the city. In Psalm 107, here's a good example of how positive the word of God speaks about the city, "Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in."

You see, the city was a place of refuge, a place of safety. Often times when wars broke out, people outside the city would move to the city to find a safe place. And in Psalm 107, the psalmist tells us that the Lord, the Lord led them, led them to a safe place, to a city to dwell in, but as we said, Isaiah speaks of two cities. You might say that Isaiah is speaking of a tale of two cities, the strong city being the city of God and the lofty city being the city of man.

Let's look at these two cities for a moment. I want to start first with the lofty city. The lofty city and we read that in Isaiah 26:5, notice what Isaiah said, "For he has humbled," that's speaking of God, "he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust." Now Isaiah doesn't mention here a particular city, he doesn't give a name. This is more of a representative city. It represents something and, of course, your question should be what does it represent? What is Isaiah meaning when he says a lofty city that's going to be brought down to ruin? Well, the word "lofty" gives us a hint, doesn't it? Lofty speaks of pride. When you look at the Hebrew word from which this word comes, it speaks of pride. The lofty city, then, is a human social order based on pride and self-salvation as opposed to God's salvation. You see, the lofty city represents a social order of pride, of self-exaltation rather than God-exaltation. It represents an order where the people who inhabit it seek a self-salvation; they try to save themselves as opposed to receiving God's gracious salvation. The lofty city is a human social order built upon the foundation of self-love as opposed to love of

God. It is essentially, a lofty city is essentially a godless, human, social order that lives by human standards and is doomed to undergo eternal punishment. This is exactly what Isaiah is saying to us this morning. He's saying that the lofty city, there is a lofty city, a representative city that lives and thrives by human standards, not God's standards, a godless society that will one day undergo eternal punishment.

By now many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with either the book or the movie entitled "The Hunger Games." You'll see a copy of the book. It's part of a trilogy written by Suzanne Collins. Some of you, you know, you find your sons, your daughters are interested, especially a lot of daughters. I've done a lot of reading about this over the last few weeks and I've been interested in what has been the appeal of "The Hunger Games." Some of you, I know, have read the books, you've told me, and some of you have gone to the movie and "The Hunger Games," the trilogy, it's part of what's called dystopian literature. Dystopian literature as opposed to utopian literature. Utopian literature deals with an ideal society. Did you know that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, over 1,000 works of utopian literature were written. Now keep in mind, people who write utopian literature are writing out of a longing for an ideal society and isn't it interesting that there is a longing within the heart of men and women for something better, something better, and that's what utopian literature is. But "The Hunger Games" is classified as dystopian literature. It's the opposite. Dystopian literature is about societies where things have gone terribly wrong, a society characterized by oppression, human misery and death, and this is the societal backdrop of "The Hunger Games." In other words, "The Hunger Games" it's kind of an image of a godless society functioning by human standards.

Now you might ask what is the appeal of dystopian literature? Why would people, especially young people, be drawn to literature that talks about a society where things have gone terribly wrong and is characterized by oppression and human misery and death? Why would young people be drawn to that? Well, I did a lot of reading over the last few weeks and there are two things that stood out. I want you to think about this with me. One of the appeals to dystopian literature for young people is this, it speaks to a young person's anxiety about the future. Dystopian literature when they read it, it kind of taps into their anxiety about the future. When I say "their" anxiety, I'm talking about young people, particularly for some reason young ladies, young women, young girls. Then there's also the second appeal, the appeal to a longing for an heroic figure who triumphs over all the odds. You see, in "The Hunger Games" one of the main characters is Katniss and she is the heroine and the emphasis here is an heroic figure that triumphs over insurmountable odds.

Now this begs a question, doesn't it? When you think about it, should we have anxiety about the future? Now many people do. Many people have an anxiety and a fear about the future. You see, we all know that there's something terribly wrong in our world, don't we? I mean, if you read the papers and you stay up with the news in any degree at all, you know that there are things that are terribly wrong in our world and we can see from our text today that a lofty city, a lofty city built on human pride, a godless society offers no protection from the judgment of God. Do you realize that? Do you realize that Isaiah is

telling us, he's telling us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that a lofty city offers no protection against the eventual judgment of God.

So when you think about that, it's easy to see why many people are very anxious about the future. What is it going to be like? What's going to happen? Well, Isaiah is telling us we don't have to guess about a lofty city. Those who live in a lofty city can expect nothing less than the judgment of the God of the universe. But you might say how can one know if they're a citizen of a lofty city? How does one know if they have somehow settled into the lofty city? Well, someone might say, "Well, I bet that's where atheists live. Atheists probably, you know, that would be the people characterizing a lofty city. Atheists, you know, atheists they don't believe in God so it would be a godless society, right?" Well, that's certainly right but I'd like for you to consider practical atheists. You've heard of practical atheists before, haven't you? Practical atheists are those who say they believe in God yet they live their life as if he does not exist. The truth is in my years as an adult, I have met far more practical atheists than I have atheists, those who profess a belief in God, may even come to church periodically, only then living their lives during the week as if he does not exist at all.

How can you know if you live in a lofty city? The lofty city is where you live when you refuse God's order for your life while you set your own order, your own values, your own boundaries, you make up your own definitions. You know, you can know today if you are living in a lofty city, you can know if you live your life refusing God's order, if you are Lord of your life, you see, instead of him. You can know that you live in a lofty city when you set your own values, you make your own boundaries and you come up with your own definitions for life and Isaiah tells us the lofty city is a city that is destined for ruin. But thank God Isaiah mentions a second city, the strong city.

Look at it with me. The strong city. He mentioned it in Isaiah 26:1, "We have a strong city; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks." I want you to see something. Do you see that word "he"? We have a strong city, he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. Now you know who that's talking about, right? That's talking about the Almighty God. God builds the strong city and he builds it, notice he sets up, what? Salvation. You see, you may be here this morning and you think, "I know what I'm looking for in life. I know if I had this, I'd be okay. If I had this, I'd be alright. If I attain this, if I reach this." And what you're really looking for, you may not realize it but what you're really looking for is God's salvation. That's what you're really looking for and I want you to see Isaiah says we have a strong city, as opposed to the lofty city, the strong city is a city God sets up. He sets it up with salvation as walls and bulwarks.

Think about the safety of that. You see, in biblical times a city would have walls and, again, many people from outside of the city would run to the city during times of distress and war and they would find security within the walls and safety within the walls, and what God is saying to us this morning is there is a city, there is a city that is built by God and the walls of it are God's salvation, there's a safety and a security and a peace that passes all understanding for those who dwell within the city. It's a future city marked by peace and full flourishing where nothing can ever make you sad again. Have you been

sad this week? Has anything brought sadness to you this week? Go back over the last six months, have you had any sadness over the last six months? Shed some tears? Heart broken in two? What we're reading this morning is about a future city, God's strong city that will be marked by peace and full flourishing and nothing will ever make you sad again. That thrills my heart today. I've tasted sadness, you've tasted sadness, but God is telling us there is a place and a time when we'll never experience sadness ever again.

Well, look at it with me, we read it in Isaiah 25:66. It starts with this, "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." You say, "Brother Van, what is that?" That is a feast. That is a party. That is a delight for every soul. Think about how many people, I mean I read the other day 25,000 children per day die of hunger. I forget how many thousands died without pure drinking water. And I know some of you sitting here today, some of you young people especially, you're real passionate, you're very passionate about helping the poor, helping the underprivileged, helping the oppressed, I want to say to you, I want to say you can't get on any better team than on God's team because one day he's going to set up a feast that's going to feed, it's going to be a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, rich food full of marrow, aged wine well refined. It's going to be the greatest celebration that mankind has ever and ever will experience.

But you say, "Brother Van, where in the world do we see that in verse 6?" That's on this mountain, do you see that, "On this mountain." Well, that's a city, that's a city, how do we know that? Well, look at Psalm 48, you'll see this on the overhead, "Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King." Now why is this important? You see, when Isaiah speaks of, "On this mountain the LORD will make a feast," all through the Old Testament the city, the real geographic city of Jerusalem is always used as a picture, a sample of God's strong city to come. Now think about how Jerusalem was laid out. It was laid out with the Temple Mount being the center and the temple, God's temple where he dwelt, he dwelt in his temple and all the city was built around God, you see. That layout gives us a picture of the future of the city of God. God's people will dwell with God and God will dwell with them and we will enjoy his salvation forever and ever. You see, Isaiah in this chapter is using Jerusalem as a symbol of the future city of God and John tells us about that future city. Are you ready for this? We read it earlier there, look at Revelation 21, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"

Can we sum it up in one sentence: gone forever is the gloom that now hangs over all human experience. Gone forever. John is saying, what John is seeing and saying is

coming in the future, he is saying that the gloom that hangs over all human experience will be gone forever. You know that gloom, don't you? It shows up in daily life, it really does no matter how good the day will be. I heard John Piper say years ago, you know, no matter how nice the fruit is, there's always a bruise somewhere. No matter how well-planned the worship service is, there is always something, there is always something that goes wrong. There is a gloom that hangs over human experience right now, right now, but God's word is telling us that there is coming a time when that gloom that hangs over our human experience, that phone call in the middle of the night, those words from the doctor that say there is no hope, we can't do anything else, when your children have gone off the rails and your heart's broken, the gloom that hangs over human experience right now, there is going to come a time when all that has left and it's gone.

Now here's what you ought to be, here's how I want you to track with me, okay? How is that going to happen? Now we can sit here and say, "I know it's going to happen but how is God going to do this? Is there anything that we can look to and say right there, okay, I see evidence that this is going to happen. How is God going to bring this about?" Well, he gave it to us in verse 7 and you'll see it on the overhead, "And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering," that's the shroud, now we'll go over that in a minute, "that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever." This verse, let me just take just a few minutes to unpack this. This is so beautiful. This is God, he will swallow up on this mountain the covering. Now, the Hebrew word for that is "shroud." You'll see a picture of that on the overhead and that's a burial cloth. You can order them online even to this day. Jesus was wrapped in a burial cloth, in a shroud. Did you know that all of mankind lives under the shroud of death? That's what Isaiah is saying in verse 7, "he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples." You see, you may be here today and you may be thinking, "I can't wait until I get married. I can't wait until I get out of high school and get a job. I can't wait until I get a new car. I can't wait until this. I can't wait until that." You know, we do, we look forward to things and we think, "Once I get this, you know, it's just going to keep getting better and better." But the shroud of death hangs over you.

I used to annually, Catherine, Candy and I would go to Alabama to visit my dad, and each year, you know, he'd get older and I remember he would, as we would leave he would stand at the door on his porch and he'd stand there and he'd waved to us and, I mean, I just fell into tears and I couldn't help it because I thought, you know, no matter how good the trip was, no matter how things went, I knew he's going to die. He's going to die. The shroud of death hangs over us all. We can make our plans, we can do what we want to do, we can build this and hope for this, but the shroud of death hangs over all the living. You live in the city, you live in the suburbs, you live out in the country, you think you've got away from everything, the shroud of death hangs over you. You can't get away from it. Death is the punishment for our sin. God told Eve to eat of any tree of the garden but you cannot eat of this tree, when you do, you will surely die. Understand today that death is a punishment for our sin.

So what God is saying in these verses, he's saying this, he's going to deal with our biggest problem. God's going to deal with our biggest problem. You may think you have big

problems but your biggest problem is the shroud of death that hangs over you and Isaiah is telling us here that to deal with this God would send his Son Jesus Christ to bear our punishment on the cross. Jesus himself would go under the shroud. You do remember when they took him down from the cross, what did they do? They wrapped him in a shroud, burial cloth. They wrapped him and took him to a tomb but on the third day, here's what happened in John 20, you'll see it, "And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself." Let me ask you: what was missing? What was missing in that tomb? It was none other than the Son of God who had been raised from the dead just as he said. Jesus went under the shroud of death in our place but he passed right through that shroud, he passed right through it breaking the very bands of death. Jesus conquered the greatest enemy of mankind, he conquered death.

This is exactly what Isaiah prophesied years before it ever happened. This is how God is going to build a strong city. This is how God is going to deal with the greatest enemy to mankind. Jesus Christ is going to pay the penalty for our sin and God will raise him on the third day. That's what Easter is about, saints. That is what Easter is about and so what does all this mean? It means the gates of the strong city are now open. That's what it said in verse 2, look at it, "Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in." The city we're talking about, this future city, the gates are now open. They are open today, wide open for boys, girls, men and women to come. The gates of the city are wide open because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and his resurrection. Religion will not get you in. Morality will not get you in. Being a good person, accumulating all of your goodness can never never never pay the sin debt, only the perfect sinless Son of God, and through him, through faith in him by grace, the gates of the strong city are wide open.

You know, and I thought this week, I especially want to say this to my young friends who are enjoying "The Hunger Games" and perhaps it, you know, it kind of helps tap into your anxiety about the future and that need for a hero, can I say to you this morning Jesus Christ is the ultimate hero who relieves our fears and anxieties about the future. He's not some made up fictional figure. He's real. He rose again. If you're looking for a hero, I can't commend to you anybody better than Jesus. He can deal with those fears and anxieties about the future because he has risen again. He is seated today at the right hand of the Father and he has promised he will come back for everyone who loves his appearing. You're going to see him. You're going to see him. But that's not all, he is the ultimate hero who triumphs over the most difficult of all else, death itself, and because he has risen, we shall rise too.

Now what should our response be as we close? What should our response be to all of this? First I want to talk to my Christian friends, those of you who know Jesus in a saving way, I'm not talking about you're ultra-religious or you're highly moral, I'm talking about you know Jesus in a saving way, you trust him and him alone. The psalmist says, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." You know Christ,

you're one of his, I want to say something to you first. What do we do in the meantime until this city that John spoke of, this strong city that we enjoy it in its fullness and reality, what about in the meantime? Jesus said something to us that we need to take into consideration. Jesus said, "You," speaking to his followers, "You are the light of the world, a city set on a hill." Now teenage friends, in light of that, how should you live? How should you live your daily life? What Jesus is saying is this: Christians, church, you are a sample light of the city to come. Today the church is a city set on a hill to shine, to show forth the praise of the God who saved us; to do good works, not to earn our salvation but to do good works that point to the glory of the God who saved us. So right now, right now Christians, right now church, we are like a part, a little glowing part of that city that is to come now, now today in the meantime until that city becomes a full reality for us to enjoy. So Christians, go and light the world. Go love your city. Go love your city. Go love the city of Mount Washington. Go love the city of Shepherdsville. Go love your city with the love of Jesus. Go love your city with good works that point to the glory of God. That's what God desires, that's what he saved us for, to be a city on a hill.

But then what about those who do not know Jesus in a saving way? What should your response be? It is simply this: you must obey the Gospel. You must obey the Gospel. What is the Gospel? You'll see it on the overhead. I think this is a good breakdown. I didn't originate this myself, I found this the other day. I like it really well and so notice how it is spelled out on the margin Gospel. G is God created us to be with him. Did you know that? God created us to know him, to enjoy him. He did. He really did but the problem was, O, our sin separated us from God. You see, we are missing out on the greatest of all blessings and joy of knowing God, of knowing him and enjoying him and many people have settled for far less than what they were created for. Our sin separated us from God. S, sins cannot be removed by good deeds. I know, I know we're wired for that, we're wired to think that we could just be good enough and do the right things and somehow God will be happy with us and pleased with us and he'll love us and accept us. The Bible doesn't teach that. The next statement makes this clear, paying the price for sin. Jesus died and rose again, okay? We couldn't pay the price. Our good works could not pay the price, only the perfect sinless Son of God could. Paying the price for sin, Jesus died and rose again. E, everyone who trusts in him alone has eternal life. Everyone. Everyone who trusts in him, okay? Do you trust him? Do you trust him? Then finally the life with Jesus starts now and lasts forever. Praise God. You must obey the Gospel.

At the end of the third book of "The Hunger Games" trilogy, the author, Suzanne Collins, writes these thoughts of the main character, Katniss, and listen to what she says and I'll close with this. At the end of the trilogy, at the end of a trilogy about a dystopian society, a godless society, here's what a lofty city, a godless society will leave you aching for. Listen to what she said, "What I need is the dandelion in the spring, the bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction, the promise that life can go on, that it can be good again." The Gospel, friends, the Gospel promises this and so much more. Believe the Gospel. Love the Gospel. Obey the Gospel.

Let's bow our heads.