

The City of God  
*The Gospel According to Isaiah*  
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Let's take our Bibles and turn together to Isaiah 26. In the Bible when it wants to paint a picture of a society in rebellion against God, it usually chooses the metaphor of the city; very often it's the city of Babylon. Certainly, that has been the case in the past few chapters of Isaiah, Babylon which got its name from Babel, the first city in the Bible, the first city organized specifically with a view to dethroning God and enthroning humanity. The first attempt to establish security and success and supply and services without any sense of dependence on God or acknowledgment of God and it is that city that is referred to in this chapter as the lofty city in verse 5, that is the prideful city, the city whose pride and pomp and power, its attempt to organize humanity, to provide services and security in opposition to God, leave it at a distance from God and will leave it ultimately humbled and exhausted and annihilated. That's really the picture that's painted in these chapters.

Over against that picture, we have the picture of Zion, the city of God. That was the theme of chapter 25. Chapter 25 is almost entirely positive; it is a song put into the mouths of those who have arrived home in Zion, the city of God. All their troubles are over; all the struggles are past; all the temptations of life and all the tribulations of history have come to their conclusion and they are now in the presence of God and when you read chapter 25, you hear it to be a psalm of absolute unaltered and unalterable praise. There is no blemish in it, there is no dark spot in it, there is no shadow over it. It is all light; it is all bright; it is all good. But we can't sing that song yet. That's the song for those who are in Zion.

In the meantime, we are traveling upwards to Zion, the beautiful city of God. That's our destination but we've not arrived yet. Here in chapter 26, we have a song to sing as we're traveling upwards to Zion. The people who sing this song know about the previous song. They have in view the same place but there are things in the way, there are impediments along the way so in chapter 26, we have a focus on the city of salvation amid the contradictions of life but still expressing the confidence of faith. Look at how they begin. They begin by picking up the very themes that we found in chapter 25 as it talked about the city of salvation, "In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah." In that day, looking forward using this formula that points us forward into the very far distant future; very far distant as far as Isaiah is concerned. It's a formula that contains not only a view forwards into the distant future but that rings with confidence and faith. It has a

confidence in it as God's people see all of history moving forward towards a point in time that has been determined in advance by God. That period in time will end the story of humanity as we know it. The lofty city, verse 5, will crumble, it will fall, it will be trampled down, it will come to an end. In other words, the world system, the culture, the society, the environment we live in, the world as an entity, the world as a spiritual entity, will come to an end. Only the city of God, the strong city of verse 1, will last. We have a strong city, says the speaker, the singer.

Then you notice that this future hope is a present reality. You notice the emphasis: we have, right now we have Zion, we belong to Zion, we've come there. We haven't seen it but we believe it. We haven't touched it but we trust it and even now we can say in the very strongest terms, with the firmest language that we are so secure even now, so certain of it right now, that we can say, "We have a strong city." There is nothing like this in the world. There is no society in the world that guarantees its people freedom from despair, freedom from depression, freedom from death. There is no society here that can guarantee its people freedom from final judgment but as these people sing their song about this strong city of salvation, their focus is on God. Not on ramparts, not on walls, but on God, God himself is the security towards which they look. Walls of salvation surround the soul he delights to defend and you can see as they reflect on what this city of salvation looks like, they spell it out: in this city there is a security that gives peace, a security that gives peace.

Look at verse 2, this city is for whom? He tells us, he spells it out, this city has its gates open for "the righteous nation that keeps faith. The righteous nation that keeps faith may enter it," he says. Here when he talks about righteous, you understand he's not talking about the perfect. We know they're not perfect because they go on to describe the discipline of God in their lives they're experiencing in verse 16. They go on to describe their own sense of ineffectiveness in serving God in verse 18. They're not perfect. They're not complete. They're not all together, but they are righteous, that is, they are considered righteous, they are counted righteous, they are proclaimed to be righteous in God's sight. They are right with God, we would say. They are right with God.

How are they right with God? What's the mark of people who are right with God? Well, it is not, as I said, their consciousness of not being ineffective or their sense that God doesn't need to discipline them from time-to-time but rather it is their faith. It is their faith that makes them right with God. They're committed to Yahweh. That is, to Jehovah, to the God who has revealed himself, to Jehovah, Jesus in his fullest revelation. They are committed to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They trust him. They trust him and they're given this standing. It's as if they're already there in Zion. They're as good as there. In the words of an old hymn, "More happy but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven." They may be happier than I am but they're not more secure than I am. Even though they're there, they're not more secure than I am right now. We have this righteousness that is a gift of God and comes to those who believe. Isn't that amazing? Our own righteousness is not good enough to gain entry to that city. Human righteousness could not stand in the blistering blaze of God's holiness. Self-righteousness is a species of pride and therefore disqualifies us from entry into that city of God. But

here is a righteousness that God gives. God gives it as a gift. He gives it to those who believe. He gives it to those who trust him, who trust in his Son. It's by faith from first to last.

What does this faith look like? He goes on to tell us in verse 3, "You keep him in perfect peace." Perfect peace. What kind of peace is this? This is not peace with God in the normal sense. This is not the peace with God that comes because you're right with God. They've already been declared that they are right with God so that peace with God is covered. This is more subjective. This is the peace of mind and heart, in fact, that's the language that is used. You keep him, that is, you guard him, you protect him, you secure him or her in perfect peace. Peace that is undiminished, undisturbed. Everything could be flying around these people, everything could be hurled against these people, chaos could be everywhere around these people, circumstances may be against these people but in their hearts what are they experiencing? Perfect peace. God is garrisoning their hearts in perfect peace.

How does it come about? He tells you. It is because their minds are stayed on God. Their minds are stayed there. You know what it means to be stayed on something. I asked the children earlier this morning, "What does that mean?" One of the children said it means to be quiet. I don't know if you could translate that into practice at home but that was the theory, at least. To be stayed on God is to have your mind fixed there. It means to be at peace and quiet there. It means that you're deflected from him there. It means that you are home there. You've taken off your shoes, you've put your feet up, you're relaxed. You're reclining in God to have your mind stayed on God. You will not be diverted from that. That will be the focus. That will be the place where you stop and stay and rest and be quiet.

A mind stayed on God and you notice that he goes on to clarify this. What does this mean? This is what trusting in him means; this is what faith looks like in practice. People's minds are focused, stayed, resting upon God. This is the opposite of the double-minded person that Jesus refers to or the person who serves two masters. Here is someone who has put all their eggs into one basket. Here is someone who has put all their investments in the same bank, someone who has put all their commitments in one place, in God. In God in Christ. That's not to say that we despise the God-given abilities we have or ignore the God-given opportunities that life offers but it does mean that we refuse to believe the lie that we can be independent of God and at the same time, enjoy perfect peace. What it comes down to is faith. This unreserved casting of ourselves upon God. This is what Paul is referring to when he says, "Therefore, since we've been justified by faith," we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what he means when he writes to the Philippians and he says, "I am praying that God will guard your mind in Christ Jesus, give you perfect peace."

So, there's the standing that gives us peace and there's this knowledge that we have to share with people because we can't keep this good news to ourselves. Verse 4, the person who enjoys this wants others to enjoy it too and so we find these people talking to each other, "Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock." They're

talking to everybody generally, I think. To begin with, they're saying to everybody, "There's only one God and you need to trust him if you want to know this peace." They're saying to the world around us, "There is only one name under heaven given by which we must be saved. You must trust in Jesus if you're going to experience peace with God and peace within."

But they're also talking to each other. Here are believers speaking to one another and they're saying to each other, "You need to trust in God. Yes, I know you have trusted in him but you need to keep trusting in him." That isn't just something you look back to and you have it written in your diary, "On this date, I trusted in Jesus," I need to wake up this morning still trusting in Jesus. I have no future unless I am forever putting my trust in him. "Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock." In other words, it doesn't matter how far I go, how old I get, what troubles I see, what concerns I may engender in my life. It doesn't matter about these things, God remains my rock and you don't get anymore solid than an everlasting rock. You can build on him. You can bank on him. You can believe in him. He is a rock to his people. He is our priceless possession. He is our secure place to stand. Professor Childs of Yale puts it like this, "He is our enduring support and abiding source of unchanging stability on whom one can lean."

This is in contrast to the society we live in and you notice the contrast that he points out in verses 5 and 6. This society we live in is going to collapse, this city of man is going to fall, the lofty city will be brought low. The world, this lofty city, is an idea as well as a place. It's an attitude and a spirit and it's all going to collapse. He's saying it's the height of foolishness to think that human institutions and even humanity of self can be a secure place. The only rock is God and so he talks about the city of salvation and he says those who are believers live their life as those who belong there. That's where their citizenship is. Our citizenship is in heaven.

Meanwhile, here's the reality of this song, the song we sing now because here in verses 7-19 are the contradictions of life. The contradictions of life because the life of the believer in the world is one of chances and changes. We have security but we don't have immunity. We know our life is not chance but rather that it is ruled by divine decision. But I'm glad that biblical religion is not unrealistic. It is a realistic religion. Look at verse 8, here's the key phrase, "We wait for you." We're still waiting for you. We're waiting for you to act. We're waiting for the fulfillment of the promises made to us in Christ. We're waiting in faith, not by sight. Here we're in the conflict, that present tension between what we have already and what we are going to have in Christ and here's how the believer thinks, look at verse 7 first, "The path of the righteous is level; you make level the way of the righteous." Now, I want to tell you that's faith talking there. That's not experience talking, that's faith talking. That's the way it looks in the eyes of faith and when we get home to heaven, that's the way it's going to look as we look backward that we got from A to B and it was a level path. God took us along that path from A to B and now that we're home in heaven, we'll recognize God was in charge of the whole deal. Faith says that's how I'll see it. Experience says I'm still waiting to see it. Do you see? It goes on to the waiting bit in the next verse. That's the way I believe it is. It's all in God's

hands. He is actually filling the valleys and he's leveling the mountains and he's making a straight path for me to get from where I am into his everlasting presence but right now in the midst of the experiences of life, I don't see it, I don't feel it. I'm waiting for that but that's what I'm waiting for, that which I have put my trust in. It's all being mapped out by the righteous One and so God's people wait.

They wait to the end because we believe in the perseverance of the saints, that is the saints persevere to the end. Waiting for God to act, waiting for what is before us is an essential component of biblical faith. The waiting is a spiritual statement. The waiting is a personal thing. We wait for him. "O Lord, we wait for you, your name and remembrance are the desire of our souls." That's what we want. We want God. Our goal is God himself. Our destiny is God himself. We are looking for him. We are looking to enjoy him forever. There is a backward glance to God's revelation of himself to Moses, "I Am That I Am," the name and the remembrance of God are references to his character and the believer says, "I'm yearning. My soul is yearning for God himself. My soul yearns for you," verse 9, "in the night; my spirit within me earnestly seeks you." Why does he say that? Why does the believer say this? It's because it's not automatic. I don't wake up in the morning and think "my soul yearns for God." I have kind of to talk to myself. I look at myself in the mirror in the morning and you look at yourself in the mirror in the morning and you either look in there to shave or to put your make-up on. I look to shave, to reassure you, and I'm looking in the mirror and I have to say to myself, I have to talk to myself, "Why did I get up this morning? What does God want me to do today? What is the big picture of my life?" And the answer of the Bible is, "Look, you need to yearn for God. That's what you need to do." Of course, I don't always want to do that but I do have to tell myself that that's what I have to do. You see the emphasis on the inwardness of true religion. It's not just a matter of activity or formality, it's a matter of the heart.

Then he says something about the effect of this. He says, "When your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness." That's a difficult verse to explain except, I think, that it probably means this: obedience to God, waiting for God, yearning for God, is such a supernatural thing that it has an impact on the world and leaves the world actually without excuse. It doesn't matter how good a Christian you are, how great a Christian you may be or what a great life you may live, just the fact that you are one of those people who are waiting for God is a telling testimony to the world. Jesus didn't say go out and be the salt of the world and the light of the world, Jesus said you are, passively you are, just by being what you are as a believer.

But you see, in the midst of this we struggle while we're waiting. We struggle. We struggle with human perversity. Look at verses 10 and 11. We think about the people in the world around us and we think, "You know, God does a lot of good stuff for the people around us in the world." In his common grace, he gives them things to eat and drink and wear. He gives them things to enjoy. He gives them good times and parties and he gives them all kinds of things, freedom from fear and want and war. He gives them lots of favors. Throughout history, he has given to people who don't believe in him, he's given to them civil societies, organized societies in which there are laws that keep society together so that good people are encouraged and bad people are punished and society

functions well. There is uprightness in the land. Then sometimes God allows or sends things that are spectacularly different. He may send an amazing harvest, for example, or he may give people, humanity, an amazing discovery: we found oil, we found gold, we found natural gas, whatever it may be that brings benefits to humanity. It's an amazing thing, an action of God. Or there may be wars: world wars or 9/11s or whatever it may be to get the attention of the world. Whether they're good or bad, these things that God does himself, as it were from time-to-time, get the attention of the world.

But as the believer looks on, what does he see? Verse 9 and 10. When the Lord shows favor to the wicked, they don't learn righteousness. In a land of uprightness, a civil society, what does he do? He deals corruptly and doesn't see the majesty of God. And when God does something big in the big stage of the world whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, whether it's a great gift or a great punishment, what happens when his hand is lifted up? They don't see it. They don't see it. They don't learn. God gives them so much favor, uprightness, lifts up his hand and they have no respect for who God is, no concern for the things of God, no repentance. The God who is there remains marginal, incidental, insignificant to them. People called 9/11 a wake-up call but I ask, who woke up? Did the nation wake up? No. Individuals perhaps. The nation is no nearer to God than it was before 9/11 tragically.

But it will not always be like this. One day those who don't see will see and that's what they're praying for, "O Lord," they go on to say, "let them see your zeal for your people. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them." There is coming a day when God will reveal the distinction between the world and the church and the prophet is praying for this. He's encouraging God's people to cry to God for this, "Let the world see what your people mean to you. Let them see what they mean to you." It's echoing this language, I think, that the Apostle John uses when he's writing in 1 John 3 and he says, "People don't see what we are now, it does not yet appear what we shall be though we are the children of God," and we really are the children of God, the world looks on and the world doesn't see anything different. It doesn't see a label, "I am a child of God. I am a King's kid," or any of those things. It just sees an ordinary person with ordinary fears and ordinary doubts and ordinary struggles.

But he goes on to say, "But when he shall appear." When he shall appear. When Jesus returns, "we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." On that day, it will all become clear the distinction between the world and the church. He sees that. He calls for that. He prays for that day when that difference will be clear. And the believer in this world as he struggles with the perversity of the world, reminds him or herself that because we know that God can do whatever he's done in the past again, we know the destiny of the world, "other Lords ruled over us," they say. There were other influences, other figures, other powers that were spreading their tentacles around the world. They've all come and gone. They are dead and they will not live. Meanwhile, quietly, secretly, one-by-one there is an ingathering that's going on. "You've increased the nation, O Lord." You've increased the nation. You are glorified. God is adding to the church of Christ. He is adding to the people of God discreetly, one-by-one, men, women, boys, girls, who know him.

We struggle with human perversity and we struggle with divine severity, verses 16 and 17. Sixteen indicates a swing of mood as the believing community is pouring out a whispered prayer in great anguish to God, "O LORD, in distress they sought you; they poured out a whispered prayer when your discipline was upon them." This is the church talking. This is the church that feels as if God's hand upon it is heavy. It used to be great days, glory days, happy days but actually it seems as if it's quite hard to be a believer. It seems there is a heaviness, that God's hand is heavy on his church right now and in those days, it's hard to pray. In those days, it's hard to barely utter one word of prayer and we have more questions and we have prayer requests. Why? Why doesn't he do something? Why doesn't he act? Why aren't we beamed up out of here? It's like John the Baptist, do you remember? Who gave such a great affirmation of who Jesus was but when he was in prison, he sent a message to Jesus saying, "Did I get this right?" There are times you feel like that too. "Did I get this right?"

Not only that but there's a sense of failure that we often have. You see this great picture that Isaiah paints in verses 17 and 18. I'm glad he used the illustration because if I used it, I'd get into trouble. But you notice the illustration he uses is of a pregnant woman who's having a baby. She writhes, she cries out in her pangs. They didn't have gas and air or whatever that injection is you get. I haven't had it myself but apparently it's good. She's writhing and crying out in pains when she is near to giving birth. Isaiah says sometimes the people of God feel like this and then when it all happens, what happens? "We were pregnant, we writhed, we've given birth to wind." Nothing. That's the way we feel. This is the people of God and their experience in the world. They feel ineffective. They feel as if they're not achieving things. They feel as if they're not getting anywhere. They feel as if no matter what they've been doing and what they've done, nonetheless it seems as if they're unproductive in their Christian lives. The church can feel like this at times. We just knock our head against the wall; we pour our money into evangelism, we do all kinds of things and we don't seem to get anywhere.

Wind. Nothing. We struggle with that. That's what it means to live in the world now this side of Zion and we struggle above all with our own mortality and the answer to our struggle, verse 14, with our own mortality, with a sense that somehow or other some of our people might miss out in that final triumph, is that God is going to gather his redeemed to Zion, even those who have died long ago. Verse 19 gives the answer, "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!" Do you notice that? The dead are not abandoned, they still belong to God. They're your dead, says the prophet. The believing dead will be raised with shouts of joy to share in the victory of that final day. Notice that they still live to God because it's the dead who are being addressed, "You who dwell in the dust, waken, sing for joy." Here's a reminder that God's kingdom is not limited to time, it extends beyond the grave. This is the first clear statement of resurrection in the Bible. Of course, it becomes even clearer that Sunday morning that Jesus emerges from the grave and there he is alive and well and drinking wine and cooking fish and eating it with them by the lakeside and letting them touch him, letting them hear him and letting them hang out with him for those six weeks. He is alive and it's on the basis of that resurrection, because we believe that Jesus died

and rose again, we know that he will not come again without bringing with him those who have died in Jesus. The Lord himself, the Lord himself, will descend from heaven with a cry of command and the voice of the archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we who are alive and left will be caught up together with them into the air to be with the Lord.

Well, that leads us to the last thing. The city of salvation is our ultimate address, it's where we're going. In the contradictions of life, we struggle with our own mortality, with human perversity and with divine severity and in the midst of it all, right now, in these days, we have the confidence of faith, verses 20-21. We live between the times. The resurrection of Christ has taken place but our resurrection has not happened yet. We're waiting for the salvation of our God and in this last section, you notice that it comes to the high point of that future that's coming, "Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by." It's the language of the Exodus, go and hide yourself under the blood. It's the language of the flood, get into the ark. Trust God, get into the ark, the judgment is coming. Find your security in God. Go to the rock. Hide in the rock. "Go to the place of safety I have provided." Where is that place of safety? It's available to those who believe. Go there. Stay there until the judgment is past. Remain there. In your heart, remain there trusting in him. Trusting in him. Finding your security in him. Resting in him.

Remain there for a little while. Just for a little while. "It may seem long to you but in my economy," God says, "it's just a little while." In the language of Peter, "Don't overlook this fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow." For a little while. I know that in the midst of life, especially when it's hard, it feels like an eternity. Then, of course, in the midst of life when things are really happy, those times just go so quickly, like a nanosecond and God's purpose is just a little while and something remarkable will happen. The Lord is coming from his place. The Lord is coming from his place. What is that referring to? That's referring to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. In a little while, the Lord is coming from his place. This same Jesus that you saw ascend into heaven will come from heaven. Every eye will see him, even those that pierced him shall look upon him whom they have pierced. The Lord will come and he will not be slow.

I will come again, says the Lord Jesus. That is the great affirmation of the Bible. We live and that is the big next thing that he is going to do in history. Jesus will come again. Every eye will see him. It's an amazing thing that when he comes again it will be good news for some and bad news for others. He's coming. You notice, verse 21, "to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will not more cover its slain." God is going to come to do that in Christ to punish the wicked. But he's coming for his own people, "Come, my people." The Lord is coming out of his place. He is coming to us. Isaiah's contemporaries would never, ever finally put the world to rights. You and I will never, ever transform the city. You and I will never, ever change the world. It will always end up like wind, nothing.



But God will change the world. The Lord is coming out of his place. People may taunt us and say where is the promise of his coming and Isaiah would say, "Look at what he's promised about the first coming and he came, as surely as he did that that first time, he'll come again a second time." You see, the waiting of the believer is only ultimately for a little while. Our confidence is firmly based on the resurrection of Jesus our Savior and when the early church responded to the promise of Jesus when he said, "Surely, I am coming soon," with the affirmation, "Amen, come quickly, Lord Jesus." The New Testament church was sharing the same stance as these believers in this song were, they are recognizing we live in between the times, between the promise and the fulfillment. We live in between Jesus come and Jesus coming. He came to bear sin, he comes to bring salvation and here we are in the meantime. What is our great cry? What is our great longing as the people of God? What is our yearning? Surely, it is to say, "Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus." In the words of an old gospel hymn, "It may be at morn when day is awaking, when sunlight through darkness and shadow is breaking," that Jesus will come in the fullness of glory to receive from the world his own and the heart cry of the people of God is, "O Lord Jesus, how long? How long ere we hear that glad song, Christ returneth? Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Amen! Come, Jesus, come."

Let's pray.

*Father, in the midst of the contradictions of life, help us to express together the confidence of faith that out of Zion will come our Deliverer, our Rescuer. The Lord will come from his place, he will come for his people, he will come for us who have stayed our minds on Jehovah and to trust him for his grace. We pray this in Jesus' strong name. Amen.*