

The Final Gathering
The Gospel According to Isaiah
By Dr. Liam Goligher

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Bible Text: Isaiah 27
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Tenth Presbyterian Church
1701 Delancey Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to Isaiah 27. There is a house on our street that sold about last October and since it's sold and I think we would all agree that it's probably the best house on our street, since it's sold, there have been workman there every day: the noise, the disruption and only yesterday our neighbors, we were standing talking as we have done many times since they started, wondering what on earth they're doing to this house. It was perfect before as far as we could see, those of us who were nosy enough to look in through the windows, the woodwork, the Victorian woodwork was perfect. We thought it the best example of a Victorian townhouse in our area of the city. Well, whatever they're doing, there is rubble everywhere, noise everywhere, disruption everywhere. What are they doing? I mean, is it being turned into apartments? They're not allowed to do that. Are they going to flip it and pass it on to somebody else? No, they're actually getting it ready for them to live in.

I thought about that this morning as we were thinking of this passage because there are times when your life as a Christian feels a bit like that. It feels like you're being pulled apart in every possible way: things are being pulled out of your life; other things are being brought into your life that are uncomfortable. Life becomes a bit of a hassle and you wonder what is going on here? What is God allowing to happen in my life? Things that I've lost, things that I've gained. I'd rather of had those things; I'd rather not have had those things. Sometimes it's the church, isn't it? The church often looks like a house that's been torn apart, this old house. The wiring is being ripped out, the roof is taken off, the plumbing is being repaired, the termites are being eradicated and outside there's piles of rubbish and trash accumulating. It seems as if the church is being demolished brick-by-brick until it's almost unrecognizable.

Do you feel that? Do you feel that about this church? Do you feel that about the church of Jesus Christ worldwide? That's the question, really, that we ask as we look back to this great passage in Isaiah. Is God about to flip it? Pass it on to somebody else? Get rid of it? The answer of this chapter is: all that God is doing in your life and all that God is doing in his church is being done in order that he might live in it and he might dwell in it. That's the message of this passage. Let me put it in context for a moment because what Isaiah is doing in this section which comes to an end at the end of chapter 27 in this central section

of the book, is described how a believer might live in a chaotic world. He begins by saying a believer exists through this period by believing God, that is, believing God's promise, trusting God. He goes on to describe in chapter 25 what the long-term outlook for the believer is. The long-term outlook is great: it's death defeated and a royal banquet, the finest of food and wine, chapter 25. What's the posture of the people of God right now, then, in the meantime? Well, chapter 26 says the posture of the believer right now is that we are waiting. We are waiting for something. We haven't arrived yet. It isn't here yet. We can't look around ourselves and even see the beginning of it yet. We are waiting for God's purpose and presence to come in all its fullness.

Then we come to chapter 27 and in a sense we go back to looking at the end story. We look at ourselves now in this waiting period in the confusing context in which we live our lives right now and we are asking the question: what is God going to do with us in the future? And so, if you look at chapter 27, you can see the flow of the chapter can be identified by the formula "in that day." That's the phrase that ties it all together four times: two at the beginning, two at the end. At the beginning where God deals with his supernatural and personal foes and at the end, when the trumpet is sounded and the people of God are gathered together.

Let's break it down. First of all, in that day the people of God described here as Israel, will be finally vindicated. That's verse 1: the people of God, Israel, will be finally vindicated, "In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan," and you see how leviathan is described here as a "twisting serpent and a dragon." In the Greek version of the Hebrew Scripture, he is called "a dragon and a serpent." That same language is quoted, this verse is quoted in Revelation 20:2, "The dragon who is the serpent is that ancient serpent called the devil and Satan." The same verse is quoted in Revelation 12 where the Apostle John has a series of symbolic signs put before him and he writes that another sign appeared in heaven, "a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns," this is metaphorical symbolic language, and war rose in heaven. Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and the dragon and his angels fought back but he was defeated and this great dragon was thrown down. That is, the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

There you have the New Testament explanation of what verse 1 is about. Verse 1 is about a battle you can't see. Verse 1 is about a conflict that is invisible to our mortal eyes but in the context of the chapter, this conflict is going on while the church is in the world and while the church is struggling in the world. Every conflict, every attack, every arising of evil or false doctrine that afflicts the church of God on earth, you have to understand, is part of a bigger struggle that is going on unseen. There is a larger battle going on. The devil, Satan, this ancient serpent, this dragon, this fearful epitome of all that is evil in the world, evil in its ultimate form, is engaged in spiritual warfare in the heavenly realms, invisible to our eyes but far more real, far more fierce than anything we have encountered here. Every battle in a church. Every fall-out between believers. Every assault by the world is replicated in the heavenly realms by this conflict with the devil.

We have an illustration of this in the book of Daniel. In chapter 9 of Daniel, you have the prophet praying a prayer to God that God would come to the rescue of his people so he prays the prayer and in chapter 10, an angel comes to tell him that his prayer was heard except the angel comes 21 days after Daniel prayed. He explains to Daniel, after frightening the socks off him, of course, as angels do. I don't know if they like doing that but whenever they come to people, they frighten the socks off them I guess because they're very scary creatures. But the angel says to Daniel, "The first day you prayed you were heard. God heard your prayer in heaven. But you didn't get the answer and you didn't get this reassurance because I was making my way here when I was intercepted by the powers of darkness, by the enemies of God in the heavenly realms and I was intercepted by this battle group, if you will, of demonic powers, fallen angels assembled against you and against your people and Michael, the great angel, the great prince, came to my help because I was coming to tell you what was going to happen in answer to your prayer, in the last days." In other words, even your prayer life is engaging in this spiritual warfare in the heavenly realms. We cannot escape it. There is more going on in this room this morning, more going on in Philadelphia this morning and in the United States and in the world today than you can see with your mortal eyes. There is this spiritual conflict, the powers of darkness, spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.

Isaiah, as he looks forward, begins with this spiritual battle and he says, "Everything else I'm going to say in this section, everything else, is going to work out according to God's plan because God is going to deal first and foremost with your principle enemy, ultimate evil, that ancient serpent that was there in the Garden of Eden insinuating doubt and deception and lies and false doctrine, doctrines of demons, into the minds of Adam and Eve in the Garden. That ancient serpent is at work. He is alive and well and he is attacking the church of Jesus Christ. "In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the serpent, the dragon, the devil." In Romans 16, Paul reflects this verse when he says to the believers in Rome that they will enter into the shalom, the peace of God, because the Lord will crush Satan under their feet shortly. That's our destiny. Our destiny is to be involved with the Lord in the ultimate crushing, slaying, destroying of the dragon, the serpent.

In that day, the people of God will be vindicated. In that day, verses 2-6, Israel, the people of God, will be divinely protected. Divinely protected. Verse 2 introduces an image, the vineyard. This image of the vineyard is used throughout the Old Testament to describe Israel. Jesus does the same when he's talking about Israel; he uses the image of the vineyard in his parables and he does that on a number of occasions. So, the vineyard represents the church; it represents the visible expression of the people of God. It was a nation state in the old covenant, it is the church today and in Isaiah, he's described this vineyard, the church, the people of God, the outward visible expression of God's believing community. In chapter 3, he sees the church savaged by bad leaders and the people crushed by them, not cared for by them but crushed by these leaders who have no thought for the people. In chapter 5, he describes the vineyard in the language of a love song: a vineyard who's been cared for; every possible care and attention poured out on it. God looked to the vineyard to produce fruit but there was no fruit, no righteousness, no justice, no peace. It's a lover's lament. God looks for fruit and in chapter 5, God says,

“Well, what's going to happen is I'm going to abandon you. Enemies will overrun you. People from the outside will come in among you; they will destroy you from the inside. I'll break down your walls. There will be exile. You'll be carted away to exile.” That happened literally, of course, in the case of Israel but the principle is still the same, that God withdraws and his heavy hand comes upon his people.

Now, that was in the past. In this book here, I want you to notice that he's looking into the future. “In that day,” he's looking to that final day. Do you notice now this song is a very different song. It's a pleasant song, a pleasant vineyard, sing of it. “I, the Lord, am its keeper.” What's he saying to the church? What's he saying to Israel? He's saying to the church, “I will never finally abandon you. I will never finally abandon you. I never give up on my project.” Some of you men, you do. My dad did or he slogged through and they never looked the way they were supposed to but that is another matter altogether. But here you notice what Isaiah is saying, what the Lord is saying through Isaiah is this: that he keeps working with his people in spite of human mismanagement, chapter 3, and in spite of the insurmountable obstacle of their own sin, chapter 5, and in spite of everything hell throws at them, chapter 27:1.

Now all of that is changed. He is looking forward. Israel is no longer a wasteland. Fruit is no longer lacking. The air is no longer thick with the cries of the weaker people of God crying out for justice. Now the garden, rather than being marked by warfare and chaos, is marked by God's shalom. Now the garden is no longer deserted by God, the Gardener is present. Oh yes, he did withdraw for a while but now he is present and he's saying to them, “I'm here to stay. I'm here to stay.” Not only am I here to stay but I want you to notice, verse 4: there is no anger left. No anger left. No wrath left. No prospect of it ever. “Yes, I was angry with you for a moment. Yes, I did discipline you for a moment. I did chastise you for a while,” but now you see he's looking forward to that day, that is the final day, the day in glory and God is saying to his church, “There is no anger left because there's no fruitlessness left, there's no disobedience left.” Here is the day that is coming when the people of God will fulfill the commission given to Adam in the Garden of Eden to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

Do you notice, verse 6, in that day, “Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.” What kind of fruit is that? Jesus talks about it in John 15, “I am the true vine. My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away.” That is, it's possible to be part of the church and not bring forth fruit, in other words, not be a believer, not be a believer at all. “But every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes it,” he cuts it back. For what reason? “That it may bring forth more fruit.” You say, “How does God do that? How does God cleanse his church?” He cleanses his church when you hear his word and you obey his word. Jesus said, “You are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” So in the present, how does a church ensure its fruitfulness? It listens to the word of God; it obeys the word of God; it lives out the word of God. But here's God looking forward to that final day. There is no longer any wrath. There is no longer any prospect of discipline or chastisement or judgment, “I, the Lord, am its keeper.” He provides for it constantly, “every moment I water it.” There is no danger at any time, “I keep it,” I guard it, “night

and day.” In that day, in that day of eternity, Israel, the people of God, will be protected by God.

Thirdly, in that day Israel, the people of God, will be perfectly reconciled. There is a question raised in verse 7, do you notice the question? It comes up from the heart of the Christian, “Why is it we suffer more than other people suffer? Why do believers suffer more than the world suffers?” It’s in some of the Psalms, isn’t it? Somebody is trusting in God, somebody looks at their life, they reflect on what’s happening to them and they think, “Why is it that the godly always seem to have it harder than everybody else?” Is that true? Does the church suffer more than the world? Look at verse 7, “Has,” and I’m going to paraphrase it so you get the sense, “Has the Lord struck his people as he struck their enemies who struck them?” Did you hear that? Has the Lord struck his people as he struck their enemies who struck them? His answer: no and he points to three things. He points to God’s past forbearance. No matter how hard it is, no matter how hard the chastisement, how hard it is to be a Christian in the world, no matter how much you feel buffeted and bruised a bit by God’s providences and you can apply this to the church.

No matter how hard it is for the church of Jesus Christ, for this church, to feel battered and bruised by God’s providences, I want you to notice that those providences, those disciplines are not out of control and they are not lasting. Look at the language of verse 8, “measure by measure.” Carefully controlled. He allows them to go into exile. Yes, he sends exile. “I contended with them,” but also this relationship, this judgment, this discipline is passing. He says it’s like the “fierce breath in the day of the east wind.” By the way, the east wind was a torturous, tormenting, hot wind that came up. An interesting thing about the east wind was, of course, it would blow and it would blow away and so when God uses that image, he’s reminding them that the strong east wind was the breath of his anger but the breath of his anger came in like the strong east wind: it came, it burned you and it left. Passing. In other words, verse 8 is emphasizing the temporary nature of God’s withdrawal. God can withdraw his felt sense, his feeling sense from his people for a while. Sometimes it’s as if he’s shoeing his bride away, even sending her into exile, even getting into contention with his bride, the church, sending his servants, the prophets, to speak the word of God boldly, confronting them with their sin, as his mouthpiece prosecuting the church according to the covenant norms of God’s word.

But it’s all done towards one great end and you’ll see that great end, his full atonement: past forbearance, full atonement. Look at verse 9, “Therefore,” and there are various ways of translating the Hebrew which are not so clear and so the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture puts it like this, “When I take away their sin,” and actually those words are taken right out of Isaiah 6. You remember when Isaiah went into the temple and he saw the Lord high and exalted, he became aware of his own sinfulness and God made a provision for him from the altar of sacrifice. A hot coal was taken and put on the lips of Isaiah and the angel says, or God says through the angel, “I have taken away your sin.” There’s going to be atonement. There’s atonement. And flowing out of that atonement, look at verse 9 again, “the fruit of the removal of his sin,” so this is the effect of forgiveness and pardon, the removal of that will lead to ultimately the removal and destruction of all the altars and the Asherim and the incense altars, that

is: pagan gods, pagan shrines, pagan altars where their faith in God had been compromised. The Septuagint again, the Greek version puts it like this, "On account of this," that is, on account of God taking away their sin, "the lawlessness of Jacob shall be removed." Verse 27, "This will be the fruit of that forgiveness."

Now, you notice what's going to come to an end on that day. It haunts us all the way through our church's life and our individual lives. What's going to be removed ultimately is idolatry. Idolatry is particularly offensive to God because it represents disobedience to the first commandment to have no other gods but God and at the heart of idolatry is this: we put other things or people alongside the God of the Bible. In other words, we don't necessarily replace the God of the Bible, we keep worshiping him but there are other influences, there are other personalities, there are other forces, there are other concepts or ideas to whom we give our allegiance alongside the allegiance we give to God alone. But on that day, what he's saying is, "On that day, all of this idolatry will be gone for good." He's looking into the future, still with us but it will be gone for good.

Not only will it be gone for good but there will be ultimate victory, verses 10-11, because the world itself, the fortified city, the world system, will come to its final end. There is a contrast in these verses between the church which is kept by God and the world that is ultimately, finally abandoned by God. The church is kept by God. Sometimes he withdraws for a moment because of our disobedience but he will never let us go. The world, on the other hand, you notice it says will become "solitary, deserted, forsaken." He will not have compassion on them. He will have no favor on them. In other words, there is nothing in the entire Bible that supports any notion that in the end there will be salvation for everybody. There will be salvation for the people of God but there will be this separation. There will be those who are left abandoned finally, forsaken finally, deserted finally, without compassion finally, without favor finally and I would be failing you, if you're not a Christian person and you're here this morning, I'd be failing you if I didn't point that out to you. I can't offer you hope that isn't there. I can't say it will all work out in the end, it will be fine in the end, God loves everybody and it will be all mushy and good and nice in the end. I can't tell you that because there's no authority to tell you that. I want to look you in the eye and say, "This is a life or death, heaven and hell issue this business of trusting in the God of salvation that's found in Jesus Christ."

The last thing we see is that in that day, Israel will be finally gathered. The formula at the end again. Look at verse 12, "In that day," and it focuses our attention now on that final demonstration of God's power and grace that will come at the end of history. He describes the end of history in three beautiful pictures. The final harvest, "In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the LORD will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel." On that final day. Here's what's been going on throughout human history: there have been wars and rumors of wars and there have been attacks and assaults and the undermining of the church of God from both within and without and at the end of history there's going to be some great conflagration that will occur. But God says this, "A harvest will one day be brought to Zion. There will be a threshing and a sifting."

First of all, what's the purpose of that threshing? It is to distinguish between those who have God and those who don't; between those who belong to the people of Israel and the church of God and those who don't; between those who know God as their Savior in Christ and those who don't. This threshing, this sifting. But I want you to notice this very precious insight here, this tenderness in the language here. There is reassurance in the language here. You would think that this sifting of humanity, this threshing of humanity might involve in it the destruction of one of the grains that belong to God. You would think that in the process of that final conflagration, that final judgment, there might be the losing of one of those grains that belongs to God but do you see this beautiful picture that Isaiah paints? He says, do you notice, "One-by-one, individual-by-individual, believer-by-believer, each one of them, not a single one of those who have relied upon the Lord will ultimately be lost. All Israel will be saved." That is, all believing Israel will be saved. Not one believer will be crushed. Not one believer will be missed. Not one believer will be lost. Not one believer will be overlooked. Not one. Isn't that amazing? You need not fear the conflict. You need not fear the final conflagration because there will be a final harvest and not one believer will be missing.

He goes on to describe what will herald that final harvest, the final trumpet. The great trumpet of verse 13, "And in that day a great trumpet will be blown." The idea of the great trumpet is used in the Bible a number of ways. In the Hebrew Scriptures it's often that trumpet that's sounded on the Day of Atonement that heralds the Year of Jubilee, the period in the ceremonial law of Israel where people who were in bondage are freed, people who are in debt are liberated from their debt. A great time of liberation, freedom and so on, the trumpet of jubilee. Then there is the blowing of the trumpet that calls Israel to Mount Sinai to draw near to God. God is there. He comes down and there is the smoke and fire and the voice and the thunder and the sound of God's presence and the trumpet blows and Israel gathers around Mount Sinai to be near God. So this trumpet is a trumpet of liberation and freedom. It's a trumpet of calling people to gather to God, come near to God. Above all in the Scriptures, this great trumpet, Jesus quotes from this very verse in Matthew 24 when he's describing the end of history as we know it and he says, "At the end of history as we know it, there will be this great trumpet that will sound." Now, don't ask me, will there be a literal trumpet sound? Will it be like Jim H. one of our members here who blows the trumpet, will somebody like Jim be blowing the trumpet through an amplification system and we all hear it and so on? I have absolutely no idea. It's a picture of God getting the attention of his people, God signaling to his people, "Come to me. Gather together. It's time for your freedom and your liberation."

But above all, in Jesus language, it is the signal that the Messiah Jesus who came in obscurity once, is coming again publicly, visibly. Every eye will see him. He will send out his angels, Jesus says, with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to another. Jesus is quoting this verse. "And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost and those who were driven out will come." Gathered together. Gathered by God. Raised from the dead. "Behold I tell you a mystery, we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet for the trumpet shall sound and we shall be raised,"

we shall be raised, “incorruptible, inperishable.” The dead shall be raised and we shall be changed.

The final harvest, the final trumpet, the final destiny. They “will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Zion.” We've seen this image used earlier. We're going to sing about it in a moment from an old Presbyterian metrical rendition of Isaiah 2, “It shall come to pass in the latter days a mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills,” and who shall come in that day? Just racially pure Jews? No, many peoples will come and they will go up. They will come and they will say, “Let's go up the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.” Chapter 25 told us what will happen then: 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, dripping with calories and aged well-refined wine. That's the goal and “they shall worship the Lord Yahweh on that holy mountain in Jerusalem.”

That is the next event in the calendar of God's purposes for humanity, that trumpet sound, that final harvest, that final trumpet, that final destiny for the people of God. So, as I see this old house, whether you think of that old house as your life or this church or the church of Jesus Christ worldwide being pushed and battered and remodeled and having things ripped out and new things brought in and subject to all kinds of hassle and assault and difficulty and trouble, will you please keep in mind this great picture. This is our destiny. This is reality. This is where we are going. This is what God is doing: he's preparing us that he might live in us, that he might dwell with us. Do you know that sometimes there are echoes of that future day. Very often when God wants to bless a church, when God wants to come in a special and powerful way and reviving and visiting a church so that his presence is felt, he goes about the same thing: he disciplines and he chastens and he disturbs it; he effects it. He plays around with it and we wonder what he's doing but his goal is always the same: the eradication of our idols and the worship of no one else than the Lord Yahweh, God alone, in Christ, uplifted, exalted, glorified among God's people. That's where we're headed. Let's pray that God would do that for us in the interim.

Let's pray.

Father, we pray that you would please be patient with your unbelieving and often disobedient people. Thank you that you have shown us where we're going, this great vision of the future. We know that in the present we might see tokens of that great day that is to come. We look forward to that day when all your people are gathered in, we're gathered to God, we're gathered into your presence on that holy mountain to feast with you, to enjoy you forever. We ask you to keep our eye on that goal for Jesus' sake. Amen.

