

Isaiah 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 26. In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah. We have a strong city. He sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. Open the gates that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. You keep him in perfect peace whose mind has stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust. The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy. The path of the righteous is level. You make level the way of the righteous.

In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you. Your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul. My soul yearns for you in the night. My spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness. In the land of uprightness, he deals corruptly, and does not see the majesty of the Lord. O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it.

Let them see your zeal for your people and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them. O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all your works.

O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone we bring to remembrance. They are dead, they will not live, they are shades, they will not arise. To that end you have visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them. But you have increased the nation, O Lord, you have increased the nation. You are glorified. You have enlarged all the borders of the land.

O Lord, in distress they sought you. They poured out a whispered prayer when your discipline was upon them. Like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth, so were we because of you, O Lord. We were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind.

[2 : 1 3] We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth, and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy, for your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you. Hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover it slain.

Isaiah chapter 26 continues the declaration of the Lord's eschatological judgment and renewal that runs from chapter 24 to chapter 27. Once again, there is the punctuation of statements of the Lord's great deeds with expressions of praise. Almost the entirety of this chapter is responsive in character, beginning with a song in verses 1 to 6, and continuing with a psalm in verses 7 to 18 or 19, addressing the people in their current situation. The chapter concludes with the assurance that the Lord will act in his people's cause. These chapters contrast two cities, likely best understood as essentially the city of man and the city of God. The city of God, or Zion, was described as a place of festivity and security in the preceding chapter. That chapter described a great banquet of wine being prepared for the peoples there, and of the Lord's hand resting upon his mountain. Here the city's strength is identified with the Lord's deliverance that surrounds it, like walls or ramparts.

The gates of the city are opened in order that the righteous might enter. We might here think of faithful pilgrims ascending to Mount Zion for a feast. Entrance to the city is a mark of the Lord's approbation and acceptance of his people. The righteous person within this city, the one who trusts in the strength of the walls of the Lord's salvation that surrounds it, will know assurance of true security, freed from the fears that afflict those without. The Lord's enduring might and steadfast faithfulness is comparable to a rock. He gives his people unwavering grounds upon which to trust him. Drawing our minds back to the preceding chapter, the song concludes by speaking of the fate of the rival city, the city of man. That city, for all of its pride, has been utterly humbled and brought low. It is trampled underfoot by the poor and needy, those who are once oppressed within it and by it. The strength, security and hope of the righteous rests entirely in the Lord.

The verses that follow describe the dependence and the confidence that arises from this. Continuing to speak of people's steps, mentioned at the end of the song in verse 6, the prophet describes the path of the righteous in a way that characterises the path they choose as level, but also reveals that it is the Lord who makes it so. The level character of the path of the righteous likely refers to its moral integrity, but also to its safety, two related features. Verse 8 implies that the levelness of the path corresponds to the judgments of the Lord that are upright, straight and certain. The judgments here likely refer chiefly to the Lord's judgments upon sin, not merely to his laws. In walking this path, the righteous confidently wait for the Lord and his judgments for their sake. The righteous man desires the Lord himself above all other things, seeking the honour of the Lord's name, an honour that will be manifested in his great deeds of salvation and judgment before the nations. Where laws are well enforced and wickedness is speedily judged, evil persons are corrected and some repent, while the righteous are emboldened. The delay of the Lord's judgment is a complaint of the psalmist at various points and also of Job. Righteousness can be learnt through the judgments of the Lord in the land. Where punishment is delayed out of divine grace, granting the wicked time to repent, the wicked can actually often be hardened and made more brazen in their sins, fancying themselves immune to the Lord's justice. The prophet perceives the judgments of the Lord in the earth, but he is dismayed to see that the wicked do not, leaving them complacent in their sin.

He prays that the Lord would manifest his zeal for his people in their salvation, so that the wicked would realise the futility and shamefulness of their own ways. He prays that the Lord would consume the wicked in his judgment.

[6 : 50] The Lord's purposes for his people are consistent and good. He seeks their peace. Indeed, all of the good that the Lord's people have ever achieved has been through the Lord's purpose and power.

They were formerly under the dominion of foreign rulers, yet the Lord had consistently rescued his people from their clutches. Only the Lord's throne endures, while his adversaries and those who once persecuted his people have been brought down to the grave, their pride condemned to the pit, erased from human memory. Nevertheless, the Lord's people have increased and prospered, even despite such cruel oppression. Though all seemed lost on several occasions, and enemies seemed mighty beyond any hope of defeat, the light of the Lord's people was never extinguished. The next verse, verse 16, is difficult to translate and interpret. Perhaps its sense is that the trials of Israel's history drove them to the Lord, and as the Lord disciplined them, they came to seek his face. This is a dynamic that we witness in the book of Judges, for instance.

A common image for people and nations in distress in scripture is the woman in birth pangs. The struggle of the woman attempting to give birth is a governing metaphor in the story of the Exodus, for instance, where the story begins with Israel in birth pangs, seen in the pain of the Hebrew women who are robbed of their newborn sons, and in the courageous resistance to Pharaoh of the Hebrew midwives.

That story reaches its climax as Israel is drawn out from the womb of Egypt through a narrow passage, in the context of a focus on the firstborn and the opening of the womb. Yet the experience of Israel's history has often felt like recurring pangs without any birth. One can imagine, for instance, the experience of Isaiah's own lifetime. The experience of two deliverances from the point of the nation being overthrown, the first during the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, and the second Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC. Both of these experiences had been horrific and had involved an immense loss of life. But what had Israel achieved through them?

Assyria was still in power in the region, Judah was still weak and suffering and persecuted, and there had been no great revival of the people. The prophet has been awaiting and has prophesied a miraculous national rebirth and renewal. With each increase of pangs, he likely hoped that the time for it had come, but it didn't materialise. Commentators differ over who is the speaker in verse 19. It seems most likely to me that the speaker is the Lord himself, answering the disheartened prophet. The Lord would one day raise his people to life. The previous chapter described the defeat of death, and here we have an image of resurrection. Those now in the grave would be lifted up and would sing with joy. There would be a national resurrection, much as the one described in Ezekiel chapter 37, in the vision of the valley of dry bones. We could see such a national resurrection in the metaphorical raising of Israel from the grave of exile. We might also relate this to King Hezekiah himself, who was on the brink of death but was healed by the Lord. However, this passage does not merely deal with metaphor. It anticipates the final defeat of death and the awakening of the dead to new life.

[10:15] The earth is related to the womb on several occasions in scripture, and here we are told that the earth would give birth to the dead. The tomb would no longer be barren, but would be like an opened womb, with new life proceeding out from it. Nevertheless, in the meantime, prior to that final deliverance and resurrection, the Lord's people will have to shelter themselves from the Lord's wrath and that of their enemies. We might recall the account of the Passover here, where the people did not leave their houses while the Lord judged Egypt and killed their firstborn. The sin of Egypt was exposed in that judgment, their sin in killing the children of the Lord's firstborn, Israel. Much as the blood of the baby boys thrown into the Nile called out for the Lord's vengeance, so the blood of the slain upon the earth in Isaiah's day would be disclosed, and the Lord would act against the wicked.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways that the confidence of final resurrection can help us in the midst of crisis?