

Isaiah Part 14: The Judgments of God

Isaiah 24 and 25

Isaiah 24 to 27 are four chapters that many commentators term ‘the little Apocalypse’. They appear to describe the Great Tribulation of the end-times, and in some respects they parallel Matthew 24 and 25 and Revelation 6 to 19. See also Jeremiah 4 v 23 to 26.

Judgment on the whole earth (Isaiah 24)

“Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate” (v 1) – during the Tribulation, the earth will not be literally empty, but Isaiah’s poetic description applies: the earth will seem empty, as more than one-third of humanity will die during these judgments (Revelation 9 v 15). “As with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master” (v 2) – this verse emphasises that God’s judgment will be universal and indiscriminate, making no distinction between those of low or high social status.

- How does this chapter show the contrast between the emotions of unbelievers when faced with the calamity of God’s judgment with the reactions of believers? Why is the earth “defiled” (v 5)?

“The earth mourns and withers” (v 4) – why does the earth mourn? Because during the Tribulation, the earth will be afflicted by the terrible judgments of God – see Revelation 8 v 7 to 12. “For they have... broken the everlasting covenant” (v 5) – there is no single ‘everlasting covenant’, because this term applies to several covenants: (i) the covenant God made with Noah after the flood, never to destroy the world again by water, is an ‘everlasting covenant’ (Genesis 9 v 16); (ii) the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants is called an ‘everlasting covenant’ (Genesis 17 v 7); (iii) the covenant God made with Israel and the priesthood is referred to as a ‘lasting covenant’ (Leviticus 24 v 8); (iv) the covenant God made with David, to bring the Messiah from his line, is called an ‘everlasting covenant’ (2 Samuel 23 v 5); (v) the New Covenant is called an ‘everlasting covenant’ prophetically (Jeremiah 32 v 40), and an ‘eternal covenant’ after its establishment (Hebrews 13 v 20). Repeatedly, God has made a covenant with man, and man has turned his back on it.

“All the merry-hearted sigh” (v 7) – when God brings the judgment of the Great Tribulation, there will be no more ‘partying as usual’. The days for eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage (Matthew 24 v 38) are over, and the “mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant” ceases (v 8). “They lift up their voices, they sing for joy” (v 14) – even in the midst of great judgment, God has his own that praise him. Before the Tribulation begins, God will remove his Church; but many will come to trust in Jesus during this time, and these will “give glory to the LORD” (v 15, and see Revelation 7 v 9, 10, 13, 14).

“O inhabitant of the earth” (v 17) – the Book of Revelation, writing of this time of the Great Tribulation, makes constant reference to ‘those who dwell on the earth’ or ‘earth-dwellers’ (Revelation 3 v 10, 13 v 12), as opposed to Christians who are pilgrims, strangers on earth, whose citizenship is in heaven (Revelation 13 v 6; Ephesians 2 v 6). Where do you live? Are you an ‘inhabitant of the earth’, or do you sit with Jesus in heavenly places? “Terror and the pit and the snare” (v 17) – God’s judgment is inescapable: if you escape the terror, you will fall into the pit; if you escape the pit, you will fall into the snare. The only way to escape God’s judgment is through the cross, where “the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53 v 5).

“The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken” (v 19) – Isaiah describes God’s judgment upon the earth during the Tribulation in graphic terms. This language is echoed in Revelation 6 v 13, 14, and Revelation 16 v 18 mentions a tremendous earthquake as had not occurred since mankind had been on earth.

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“The LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth” (v 21) – the ‘host of heaven’ probably refers to rebellious angels that are judged at the end of the age, and imprisoned in the pit until the final rebellion at the end of the Millennium (Jude 6, Revelation 20 v 10). “The kings of the earth ... will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit” (v 21, 22) – under God's final judgment, one's status on this earth will count for nothing. Poetically speaking, even the moon will be ‘confounded’ and the sun ‘ashamed’. No degree of earthly greatness will help man on that day, and no degree of heavenly greatness will help an angelic being on that day! Instead, “the LORD of hosts [will reign] on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders” (v 23). At the end of the Great Tribulation, God will usher in a thousand years (the Millennium) in which Jesus will reign in glory over all the earth from Mount Zion and Jerusalem, ‘before his elders’ (the Church). God's purpose in judgment is not vengeance or vindictiveness: it is to bring about a glorious new world in which Jesus reigns in righteousness.

God will swallow up death forever (Isaiah 25)

Chapter 24 spoke of the judgment to come upon the world, especially in the Great Tribulation. During that time, those who have come to trust in God will praise him, even in the midst of his righteous judgment: “They lift up their voices, they sing for joy” (Isaiah 24 v 14). The song in Chapter 25 shows the kind of heart that praises God in the midst of trouble, and especially in the midst of the Great Tribulation.

- What does this chapter teach us about the God's “faithful and sure” plans for mankind in general, and for his people in particular? What “wonderful things” has he done (v 1)?

The righteous judgment of God has two effects: first, “strong peoples will glorify you” (v 3) – God's people will see his work and glorify him; second, “cities of ruthless nations will fear you” – the unrighteous fear God when they see his righteous judgment. “For you have been a stronghold to the poor” (v 4) – God is worthy of our praise because he brings strength to the poor and needy. We can praise God because he is a “shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat” (v 4).

“The LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast” (v 6) – the Bible speaks of ‘the wedding supper of the Lamb’ (Revelation 19 v 9), and what a feast it will be! For God's people, this will be the ‘victory banquet’ when after the final battle is over. Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, “I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom (Matthew 26 v 29).

What will God ‘swallow up’? First, “the veil that is spread over all nations” (v 7) – this ‘veil’ keeps them from seeing God, and trusting him, but God will destroy that veil. Paul speaks of Israel being blinded by a veil, but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (2 Corinthians 3 v 15, 16). Second, God will “swallow up death forever; and [he] will wipe away tears from all faces” (v 8). Death was introduced by Adam's rebellion (Genesis 2 v 16, 17), but one day death will be completely destroyed through Jesus (2 Timothy 1 v 10). Paul knew this, and proclaimed in 1 Corinthians 15 v 54: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” This will be true for every believer.

“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us” (v 9) – how great it is to wait on God, and to see him save us! Isaiah encourages us: “Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

“For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain” (v 10) – God will rest his hand of favour, power and glory on Mount Zion, and subdue his enemies. After the Great Tribulation, when Jesus Christ reigns from Jerusalem, the whole creation will know that the hand of the LORD does indeed rest upon this mountain!

Prayer – O Lord, we tremble as we read about the terrible trials and troubles coming upon the earth, and we stand in awe of your righteousness judgments. But, Lord, we praise you that the veil that keeps people from trusting you will one day be taken away, and we praise you that death itself will be swallowed up in victory. Lord, with Isaiah, we confidently say, ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us’. So, let us indeed be glad and rejoice in your salvation, now and always. Amen.