

Isaiah – An Apocalyptic Pause

Isaiah 24:21, 23 – So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high, And the kings of the earth on earth. ... Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, For the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, And His glory will be before His elders.

Review

Over the last stretch of lessons, we have watched the courtroom of YHWH widen, ring by ring. Chapters 1–6 opened the lawsuit against Judah and Jerusalem alone. Chapters 7–12, the Book of Immanuel, narrowed the courtroom to the house of David in a single historical crisis. Chapters 13–23 pushed the walls of the courtroom outward again, this time to the nations that ring Judah on every point of the compass, closing with Tyre, the last and farthest-reaching of the oracles against the nations.

Now that every nation has been individually named and judged, Isaiah does something no earlier section of the book has done; he steps back from the naming of names and pronounces judgment on “the earth” itself. This section is commonly called Isaiah’s “Little Apocalypse,” a title borrowed from the way scholars describe Matthew 24 and Mark 13, Jesus’ own end-times discourse. Before we step into the text itself, two pieces of business are owed to us from chapters 13–23, and one larger question needs to be settled before we can responsibly read what follows.

Introduction: Why We Pause Here

We are standing at a hinge point in the book. Chapters 1-23 have been building a single, unbroken case: the Holy One of Israel against His covenant people, and then the Holy One of Israel against the nations who surround them. Chapters 24-27 take that same courtroom and remove its walls altogether. The defendant is no longer Judah. It is no longer Babylon or Tyre or Moab. The defendant, according to Isaiah 24:1, is “the earth” itself. Before we walk through chapter 24, we need to do two things. First, gather up the threads we have been tracing and see how they carry into this new, universal stage of the trial. Second, and more importantly, we must address a question that Chapters 24-27 force on us head on: when the prophet uses language like a punished host of heaven, a swallowed-up death, a slain Leviathan, and an earth reeling like a drunkard, how are we supposed to read that? Literally? Symbolically? Get the answer wrong, and it will not only distort Isaiah 24-27. It will distort Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation right along with it.

I. Gathering Up the Case So Far

Remember where this began. In Pre-Isaiah Lesson 4, we established that the sudden explosion of writing prophets in the eighth century BC was not incidental; it was legal. Deuteronomy 30:19 had already established the pattern: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today.” Isaiah 1:2 opens the book by invoking that very pattern: “Listen, O

heavens, and hear, O earth; For the LORD speaks.” From that first verse forward, we have been sitting in a courtroom. The case has moved in three concentric circles:

- **Chapters 1-6, The Indictment.** The vineyard is planted, tended, and produces only wild grapes. The charge is covenant-breach: idolatry, injustice, empty ritual. The prophet himself is cleansed and commissioned in chapter 6, carrying a message of judicial hardening tempered by the promise of a holy seed in the stump.
- **Chapters 7-12, The Book of Immanuel.** The lawsuit narrows to a single historical crisis, the house of David under Ahaz, then widens again to the Northern Kingdom’s refusal to return. Assyria is revealed as the rod of God’s anger. Yet the section ends not in despair but in song, Chapter 12, because a remnant survives to praise the Holy One in their midst.
- **Chapters 13-23, Judgment on the Nations.** The witnesses expand outward. Every direction of the compass receives a formal “burden” (massa’): Babylon and Assyria to the east and north, Philistia to the west, Moab to the east, Damascus to the north, Cush and Egypt to the south, Edom and Arabia to the southeast, Jerusalem herself is indicted in the Valley of Vision, and finally Tyre, the commercial superpower of the sea, closing out the section.

By the last verse of Chapter 23, the docket is full. Isaiah’s original hearers could point to every named nation that stood trial on a map. This is the reason Chapters 24-27 read the way they do. Once the particular defendants have all been named, the only defendant left standing in the courtroom is the whole earth itself, and the Judge, the Holy One of Israel, is now shown ruling not just over Judah’s enemies but over “the host of heaven” itself (Isaiah 24:21), language that pulls the veil back on a spiritual dimension to this rebellion we have only glimpsed before now.

II. The Three Threads So Far

We have followed three threads from Chapter 1 onward, and each one has grown, not merely repeated, as the courtroom has widened.

The Messianic Hope. In the Book of Immanuel, the Hope was a Child, born to the house of David, given titles that could only belong to Deity, a Branch from the stump of Jesse ruling in perfect righteousness. In the oracles against the nations, the same Hope surfaces where we might not expect it. Isaiah 16:5 promises a throne “established in lovingkindness” in the tent of David in the middle of Moab’s judgment. Egypt is promised a coming “Savior and Champion” in Isaiah 19:20. The land itself, in Isaiah 8:8, already belonged to Immanuel before any nation was indicted. As we move into chapters 24-27, watch for the Hope to take its next developmental step: a King who reigns visibly on Mount Zion (Isaiah 24:23), a host who prepares a banquet on His mountain for all peoples (Isaiah 25:6), and a Deliverer who guarantees resurrection life to those who believe in Him (Isaiah 26:19).

The Motif of the City. Every oracle from Chapters 13-23 has, in one way or another, been a contest between two cities: the city of man (Babylon, Tyre, Damascus, each proud, self-sufficient, doomed) and the City of God (Zion, chosen, disciplined, ultimately exalted). Chapters 24-27 will not abandon this contrast; they will universalize it. Isaiah 24:10 speaks of “the city of chaos,” an unnamed, deliberately generic city standing for every proud city of man collapsed into one final image, set directly against Mount Zion, where the LORD of hosts reigns in Isaiah 24:23. The particular becomes the universal; Babylon’s fall in Chapter 13 and Tyre’s fall in Chapter 23 were previews; Chapters 24-27 show the pattern completed on a global scale.

The Holy One of Israel. This title has carried the weight of the whole book, both His holiness that demands judgment and His covenant faithfulness that guarantees a remnant. In the nations’ oracles, we watched Him judge every rival power as sovereign over history itself: “who has planned this against Tyre? ... The LORD of hosts has planned it” (Isaiah 23:8-9). Chapters 24-27 show us the furthest reach of that sovereignty yet. He does not only judge kings on the earth, but He also judges “the host of heaven on high” (Isaiah 24:21). The lawsuit that began with Judah’s kings and priests has now expanded to include the spiritual powers standing behind the nations. This is the last and largest ring of the courtroom.

III. Preview: The Little Apocalypse (Chapters 24-27)

We will expound chapter 24 in detail next week, but it helps to see the whole unit before we descend into its first verse. Chapters 24-27 divide naturally into four movements:

- **Chapter 24 – The Earth Judged.** The chapter opens with the Lord “laying waste the earth” (Isaiah 24:1), devastating it “because they have transgressed laws, violated statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:5)—a phrase many take as reaching back past the Mosaic Covenant to the Noahic Covenant and its universal moral demand on all humanity, not Israel only. The chapter builds toward the announcement in verse 23 that “the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion.”
- **Chapter 25 – The Banquet and the Swallowing of Death.** In the middle of global judgment, Isaiah bursts into praise. The Lord prepares “a lavish banquet ... for all peoples” on His mountain (Isaiah 25:6) and, in one of the most quoted verses in the whole book, “will swallow up death for all time” and “wipe tears away from all faces” (Isaiah 25:8), a verse Paul later applies directly to the bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:54.
- **Chapter 26 – The Song of Trust and Resurrection.** A remnant sings of the “strong city” the Lord has established (Isaiah 26:1), contrasted one final time with the lofty city He has laid low (Isaiah 26:5). The chapter contains one of the clearest resurrection statements in the Old Testament: “Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy ... the earth will give birth to the departed spirits” (Isaiah 26:19).
- **Chapter 27 – The Vineyard Restored and Leviathan Judged.** The vineyard imagery from chapter 5 returns, but it no longer produces wild grapes; the Lord now “watches

over it” and “waters it every moment” (Isaiah 27:2-3). The chapter opens, though, with one of the most debated verses in the book: “In that day the LORD will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent ... and He will kill the dragon who lives in the sea” (Isaiah 27:1). We will need to decide whether this is a literal creature, a symbol with a literal referent (as we concluded regarding the king of Babylon in chapter 14), or something else again.

This four-chapter unit is the true climax of the “Judgment on the Nations” section that began in Chapter 13. It is also the last stop before Isaiah turns, in Chapters 28-35, back to Judah’s leadership and the Assyrian crisis, and then, in Chapters 36-39, to the Hezekiah narrative, before the whole book pivots at Chapter 40 into comfort, the Servant, and future glory.

Chapters 24-27 are the hinge of the whole book almost as much as they are the hinge of this section; they reveal that the local courtroom drama of Judah and her neighbors has, all along, been a preview of a global and even cosmic day of the Lord.

IV. The Interpretive Crossroads: Literal/Normative or Allegorical/Spiritual?

Every time we have come to a text with heavy imagery, we have made an interpretive decision, usually without stopping to name it. When we studied Isaiah 11:6-9, the wolf lying down with the lamb, we said plainly that some try to spiritualize those verses into a picture of the present church age, and that this view collapses under the text itself because the grammar is straightforward future description. When we studied Isaiah 14:12-21, we spent an entire lesson working out, from grammar, pronouns, and context, whether the “star of the morning” was Satan himself or a future human king of Babylon whose pride mirrors Satan’s own rebellion. Both of those were, at root, the same question that Chapters 24-27 now force us to answer directly: when Scripture uses vivid, cosmic, world-shaking imagery to describe the future, is it describing something literal, or painting a picture whose “real” meaning is symbolic and spiritual only?

This question does not belong to Isaiah alone. It governs how we read Daniel’s beasts and weeks, Zechariah’s final chapters, and the entire Book of Revelation. Get the rule wrong here, and it will not stay contained to one book.

Defining Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic literature (from the Greek *apokalupsis*, “unveiling” or “revelation”) is a recognizable genre within Scripture. It typically includes vivid, often cosmic imagery (shaking heavens, a darkened sun and moon, sea monsters, multi-headed beasts, numbered horns); a mediating figure, often an angel, who explains the vision to the seer; a sharp contrast between the present evil age and a coming age of God’s direct rule; and numbers that carry structural weight (seventy weeks; a time, times, and half a time; a thousand years). Isaiah 24-27, Daniel, Zechariah 9-14, and Revelation all share these features. Recognizing the genre matters; apocalyptic literature does use symbol and figure more densely than a historical narrative in Kings or a legal chapter in Leviticus. The question is not whether these books use imagery — they plainly do — but what that imagery is for.

Isaiah – An Apocalyptic Pause

Two Traditions of Reading Apocalyptic Texts

Category	LGH (Literal Grammatical-Historical), Normative	Allegorical / Spiritualized
Basic Rule	Words carry their normal, plain sense; figures of speech are recognized but still point to a literal referent.	Images are read as symbols of timeless spiritual truths; a literal referent is optional or unnecessary.
Historical Roots	Antiochene exegesis; Grammatical-historical method; historic premillennialism and dispensationalism.	Alexandrian school (Origen); amillennial covenant theology.
Handling of Numbers	Numbers (70 weeks, 1,000 years, 3½ years) are taken as real quantities unless context clearly signals a stylized use.	Numbers are treated as inherently symbolic (fullness, completeness) regardless of context.
Handling of Beasts / Symbols	Symbols represent real, identifiable historical or future entities, especially where the text interprets itself (Daniel 7:17; Revelation 17:9-10).	Symbols represent moral or spiritual conditions rather than specific historical entities.
Israel and the Church	Kept distinct; promises made to National Israel await a literal, future fulfillment.	Merged; the Church becomes “true/spiritual Israel,” inheriting Israel’s promises.
The Millennium	A literal, future, bounded reign of Christ on the earth (Revelation 20:1-6).	A symbol for the Church Age or the eternal state; no literal earthly reign.
Resurrection Language	A real, future, bodily event.	Often reduced to spiritual renewal, revival, or a nation’s return from exile only.
Chief Danger	Wooden literalism that misses obvious, text-signaled figures of speech.	Dissolving real, future events into vague spiritual ideas and losing the faithfulness of God demonstrated to Israel.

Isaiah – An Apocalyptic Pause

The Governing Principle: Literal Unless the Text Itself Demands Figure

The Grammatical-Historical Method we have used throughout this study does not change when we open an apocalyptic passage; take the text in its normal, plain sense, according to the ordinary rules of language, grammar, and historical context, unless the immediate context clearly signals that a word or phrase is figurative. The difference in apocalyptic literature is simply that this signal shows up more often, because the genre uses more simile, metaphor, and symbol than a narrative chapter does. But recognizing a figure of speech is not the same operation as spiritualizing away a literal, future referent. A figure of speech still points to something. The LGH hermeneutic we have leaned on is still the precise toolkit for telling the difference.

Notice how Scripture itself teaches us to do this. Daniel 7 shows a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a terrifying fourth beast with iron teeth rising from the sea. That is undeniably symbolic language. But the text does not leave us to guess at the meaning. An angelic interpreter explains directly: “these great beasts, which are four, are four kings who will arise from the earth” (Daniel 7:17), and later, “the fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom on the earth” (Daniel 7:23). The symbol is not the endpoint of the vision; it points to a literal referent, four actual historical kingdoms, and the text confirms this by supplying its own interpretation. The same pattern appears in Revelation 17:9-10, where the seven heads of the beast are explicitly identified: “the seven heads are seven mountains ... they are also seven kings.” When apocalyptic Scripture interprets its own symbols, it means that we need to leave the symbolic interpretation to the Word of God and not speculate. If there is no clear interpretation of a symbolic vision or statement, then we let God have His mysteries.

Working Examples Across the Apocalyptic Corpus

- **Daniel.** The four kingdoms of chapters 2 and 7 are symbolic in their presentation, a statue, a set of beasts, but literal, identifiable, sequential empires in their referent. The seventy weeks of Daniel 9:24-27 use a number that functions as a literal chronological unit, not a vague symbol of “completeness.” Daniel 12:2, “many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt,” describes a literal, future, bodily resurrection with a literal division between the righteous and the wicked. Ezekiel’s parallel vision in chapter 37 shows how the same resurrection language is consistent in its literal, future referent, a real, final, bodily resurrection.
- **Zechariah.** Chapters 12-14 describe a literal siege of Jerusalem by “all the nations” (Zechariah 12:2-3), a literal mourning “for Him whom they pierced” (Zechariah 12:10), and a Mount of Olives that literally “will be split in its middle ... so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south” (Zechariah 14:4), when “the LORD will be King over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:9). An allegorized reading dissolves the siege into a picture of ongoing spiritual conflict and the reign into

the present, invisible lordship of Christ over the Church. A literal reading keeps the geography, the timeline, and the Person all intact: a real future day, centered on a real city, ending in a real, visible reign.

- **Revelation.** The Millennium in Revelation 20:1-6 states the same figure, “a thousand years,” six separate times in a span of seven verses. That kind of repetition is not how Scripture signals a symbol; it is how Scripture underlines a literal quantity it wants the reader to take seriously. An amillennial reading treats the thousand years as symbolic of the whole Church Age or of the eternal state; the literal-normative reading we have used throughout this study takes it as a real, bounded, future reign of the Messiah on the earth, precisely the kingdom promised to the Child of Isaiah 9:6-7 and the Branch of Isaiah 11.
- **Isaiah 24–27 itself.** This is exactly the discipline we will need to apply to the next few lessons. When the text says the moon will be “abashed” and the sun “ashamed” (Isaiah 24:23), is that literal celestial darkening (as in Joel 2:31 and Matthew 24:29) or figurative language for the humbling of every rival authority before the true King? When the Lord “will swallow up death for all time” (Isaiah 25:8), Paul’s own use of this verse in 1 Corinthians 15:54, directly quoting Isaiah in the middle of his argument for a literal, physical, bodily resurrection, settles the question for us: Isaiah meant a literal, future, bodily conquest of death, not a merely spiritual metaphor. When Leviathan is judged in Isaiah 27:1, we will need to ask, using the same method we used for the king of Babylon in Chapter 14, whether this is a literal sea creature, a symbol with a literal spiritual-political referent, or poetic language for chaos itself, and we will let the grammar and cross references (Job 41; Psalm 74:14; Revelation 12–13) answer the question rather than a prior commitment either to wooden literalism or to spiritualizing.

Why This Is Not a Minor Technical Question

This is not simply an academic exercise in genre theory. Recall our discussion in Isaiah Lesson 4 of the multiple-authorship debate: the case against a single Isaiah rested, at bottom, on a philosophical presupposition, that specific, long-range predictive prophecy (naming Cyrus by name a century and a half in advance) simply cannot happen, and therefore the text must be explained another way. The same dynamic is at work here. An interpreter who has already decided that a literal future kingdom for Israel, a literal future resurrection, or a literal future Day of the Lord “cannot” happen, or is theologically inconvenient, will find ways to read the apocalyptic texts that dissolve those literal expectations into symbol. But that decision is made before the grammar is ever consulted, exactly the same error we exposed in the higher-critical treatment of Isaiah’s authorship.

This also connects directly to Prophetic Foreshortening, the principle we established in Pre-Isaiah Lesson 3. Remember: the near and far horizons in a passage like Isaiah 61:1-2 are both literal, historical events, simply separated by a valley the prophet could not see. Prophetic Foreshortening does not spiritualize the far horizon into a merely symbolic idea; it insists that

both the near and far fulfillments are equally real, equally literal, equally future-become-historical events. An allegorizing hermeneutic collapses the far horizon into the near one, or dissolves it into the Church Age, and in doing so quietly removes the second mountain peak from the picture altogether. The literal-normative method we have used is precisely what lets us keep both mountains standing, and it is what lets us walk into chapters 24–27 expecting real, future, historical fulfillment rather than a poetic meditation on spiritual themes.

Four Working Rules for Chapters 24–27, and for Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation

- **Start literal.** The default sense of any word or phrase is its plain, normal sense. The burden of proof is on finding a figure of speech, not on finding a literal meaning.
- **Let the text interpret itself when it does.** Daniel 7 and Revelation 17 both supply their own interpretation of their own symbols. When the text does not self-interpret a symbol, leave room for mystery and seek the main point rather than forcing a private decoding.
- **Symbol still equals substance.** Recognizing that a passage uses imagery is not the same as concluding the passage describes nothing real. The figure is the vehicle; a literal, often very concrete, referent is still the destination.
- **Keep the hermeneutic consistent across all of Scripture.** Do not spiritualize Israel's promises while literalizing Israel's curses, and do not literalize Daniel's kingdoms while spiritualizing Daniel's resurrection. The same rules of language apply on every page.

In short: start plain, let Scripture interpret Scripture, treat symbols as vehicles of real referents, and apply the same rules everywhere. That is the method we will take into chapters 24-27.

Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope does not shrink as the imagery grows larger; it grows with it. The King who will one day visibly reign on Mount Zion (Isaiah 24:23) is the same Child of Isaiah 9:6-7, the same Branch of Isaiah 11:1, and the apocalyptic language of chapters 24-27 does not dissolve Him into a symbol. It describes, in the most vivid terms Isaiah has yet used, exactly how literal and how total His coming reign will be.

The Motif of the City reaches its widest frame yet: the nameless “city of chaos” (Isaiah 24:10) stands for every city of man ever built in defiance of God, judged all at once, while Mount Zion, a real and particular place, remains the fixed point where the Holy One reigns.

The Holy One of Israel is shown, for the first time this clearly, judging not only earthly kings but “the host of heaven” (Isaiah 24:21). The lawsuit that began in a small courtroom in Jerusalem in 740 BC has become, by Chapter 24, the trial of the entire created order, visible and invisible, and the same Grammatical-Historical Method that has served us since Chapter 1 is exactly what will let us read that trial as real.

The Widening Courtroom: Understanding Isaiah's 'Little Apocalypse'

