

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

Isaiah 26:1, 4, 7, 9, 14, 19-20 - In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: "We have a strong city; He sets up walls and ramparts for security. ... "Trust in the LORD forever, For in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock. ... The way of the righteous is smooth; O Upright One, make the path of the righteous level. ... At night my soul longs for You, Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently; For when the earth experiences Your judgments The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. ... The dead will not live, the departed spirits will not rise; Therefore You have punished and destroyed them, And You have wiped out all remembrance of them. ... Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, For your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits. Come, my people, enter into your rooms And close your doors behind you; Hide for a little while Until indignation runs its course.

Context

Chapter 26 is the song the redeemed sing. Isaiah has been alternating judgment and song since chapter 24: the earth emptied (24), the banquet spread and death swallowed (25), and now, before the vineyard is restored in chapter 27, a second and longer song rises "in the land of Judah" (26:1). The frame is deliberate. The last time Isaiah wrote "in that day you will say" and handed the redeemed a song, it was chapter 12, the hymn that closed the book's opening movement: "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid" (12:2). Chapter 26 is that song again, now sung on the far side of the Apocalypse, and it answers the cry of 25:9 directly. The people who said "we have waited for Him" now sing about what the waiting produced.

The song also picks up an unfinished sentence. Chapter 25 ended with Moab's unassailable fortifications brought down "to the ground, even to the dust" (25:12), the city of man falling in the chapter's last breath. Chapter 26 opens with the counter-image already promised: "We have a strong city" (26:1). The contest of cities that has run through the whole book reaches its verdict here, and the verdict comes in a song rather than a judgment oracle, because the war is over.

One feature governs the whole chapter. It is sung from inside the Kingdom looking back, yet it gathers into one frame events that later revelation will spread across years: a city already standing (26:1), the dead already raised (26:19), and a remnant still hiding while the indignation runs its course (26:20). We hold the sequence firmly and the timetable loosely, exactly as Prophetic Foreshortening requires, and let Revelation supply the intervals Isaiah compresses.

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

Structure of the Chapter

Isaiah 26 is a single song in five movements:

- 1–6: The strong city. Establishment of walls, the gates opened to the faithful nation, and the lofty city of man trodden into the dust.
- 7–11: The level path of the righteous. Waiting for God in the night, the instruction of His judgments, and the wicked who will not learn.
- 12–15: Peace established. The LORD works all our works, the former masters lie dead and forgotten, and the nation is enlarged.
- 16–19: The failed labor and the true birth. Israel writhes and delivers only wind; God answers by raising the dead.
- 20–21: Hide until the indignation passes. The remnant sealed indoors while the LORD comes out to judge and the earth gives up her slain.

Two words stitch the song to its neighbors. “City” (26:1, 5) closes the contest opened in 24:10 and 25:2, and “the dust” (26:5, 19) falls twice, once on the city of man laid low and once on the sleepers who wake. The same dust that buries the proud city gives back the righteous dead.

Exposition

The Strong City (1–6)

“We have a strong city; He sets up walls and ramparts for security” (26:1). The wall of this city is not in material but in the builder: God Himself is its defense, so that the ramparts are what He does, not what men build. This is the city 24:23 left standing when the LORD of hosts reigned on Mount Zion, and 25:1–2 sang of the rival city already fallen. Now the surviving city is named for its security, and the security is the Lord.

“Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter, the one that remains faithful” (26:2). Entry belongs to a righteous, faith-keeping nation, not to an open gate for all comers. The remnant that waited (25:9) and the strong people who came to revere Him (25:3) are the ones who have access.

Then the heart of the movement: “The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in GOD the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock” (26:3–4). “Perfect peace” translates a doubled noun, *shalom shalom*, peace upon peace, complete and settled. It is kept for the mind that is steadfast, literally leaned or propped on God, and the ground of that peace is complete confidence in the promises of the Lord. Here “trust” is the parallel of “waiting” we defined at the banquet: waiting is believing the promise through the delay; trust is actively and confidently anticipating the promises of the One who made it. And the object is named with two divine names stacked together, *beyah YHWH*, an everlasting Rock, *tsur olamim*. The strong city of verse 1 and the

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

everlasting Rock of verse 4 are the same truth said twice: the security is God, and God does not erode, nor the city that he builds.

Verses 5-6 turn to the other city. “For He has brought low those who dwell on high, the unassailable city; He lays it low to the ground, He casts it to the dust.” The unassailable city, *qiryah nisgavah*, the lofty and exalted city, is brought down in the very language that buried Moab’s fortifications a chapter earlier (25:12) and the city of chaos before that (24:10). And the foot that treads it is pointed: “The foot will trample it, the feet of the afflicted, the steps of the helpless” (26:6). The poor whom God sheltered through the storm (25:4) now walk over the ruins of the city that once towered above them. The reversal is complete and it is literal: the proud city in the dust, the helpless remnant on their feet.

The Level Path and the Wicked Who Will Not Learn (7–11)

“The way of the righteous is smooth; O Upright One, make the path of the righteous level” (26:7). The upright God levels the road for the upright walker. “Indeed, while following the way of Your judgments, O LORD, we have waited for You eagerly; Your name, even Your memory, is the desire of our souls” (26:8). The verb is *qavah* once more, the waiting that has marked the remnant since 8:17 and highlighted at the banquet in 25:9. Their longing runs into the night: “At night my soul longs for You, indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently” (26:9a).

Then a line that needs careful handling: “for when the earth experiences Your judgments the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness” (26:9b). The righteousness learned here is behavioral, not positional. It is not the right standing God grants the believer, the justification received by faith and never taught by circumstance. It is learned conduct: under the visible hand of God’s judgment, men are brought to recognize that they must do what is right, the way the Law makes plain what righteousness requires and restrains the hand that would do otherwise. The judgments of the Tribulation and the rod of the Kingdom school the nations in righteous behavior. We keep the two senses apart, because the verse is often pressed to say more than it does: judgment can teach a man to act rightly; it cannot put him in right standing before God. That comes only by faith.

Verse 10 supplies the counter thought: “Though the wicked is shown favor, he does not learn righteousness; he deals unjustly in the land of uprightness, and does not perceive the majesty of the LORD.” What judgment teaches, favor by itself does not. Show the wicked grace, set him down in the land of uprightness, and he goes on dealing unjustly and refuses to see the LORD’s majesty. This is why the Kingdom is governed with a rod of iron, and why, even after a thousand years of the King’s visible reign, a final rebellion still gathers (Revelation 20:7–9): the rod teaches behavior, but grace eventually gets abused by the humanity. “O LORD, Your hand is lifted up yet they do not see it. They see Your zeal for the people and are put to shame; indeed, fire will devour Your enemies” (26:11). The hand they would not see in mercy they will feel in fire.

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

Peace Established and the Masters Who Stay Dead (12–15)

“LORD, You will establish peace for us, since You have also performed for us all our works” (26:12). Even the works of the redeemed are traced back to God’s working; the peace is His to establish and the works His to accomplish. “O LORD our God, other masters besides You have ruled us; but through You alone we confess Your name” (26:13). Israel remembers the other masters, the foreign powers and false gods that ruled her through the long night and renounces them.

Verse 14 dispatches those masters permanently, and its wording must be seen in light of verse 19: “The dead will not live, the departed spirits will not rise; therefore You have punished and destroyed them, and You have wiped out all remembrance of them.” The tyrants who ruled Israel are dead, and they stay dead; the departed spirits, the *rephaim*, “will not rise.” Their very memory is erased, the opposite of the redeemed whose reproach is removed and remembered no more (25:8). Mark the word *rephaim* here because five verses later the same word receives the opposite sentence.

“You have increased the nation, O LORD, You have increased the nation, You are glorified; You have extended all the borders of the land” (26:15). The oppressors gone, the nation grows and its borders spread, the Kingdom expansion promised from Abraham forward is finally realized in the Day of the Lord.

The Failed Labor and the True Birth (16–19)

Now the song looks back on Israel’s distress and her helplessness to save herself. “O LORD, they sought You in distress; they could only whisper a prayer, Your chastening was upon them” (26:16). Then the image that governs the movement: “As the pregnant woman approaches the time to give birth, she writhes and cries out in her labor pains, thus were we before You, O LORD. We were pregnant, we writhed in labor, we gave birth, as it were, only to wind. We could not accomplish deliverance for the earth, nor were inhabitants of the world born” (26:17–18). The picture is a full labor that produces nothing: all the writhing and crying of childbirth, and at the end only wind. Israel could not bring forth “salvation” by her own effort; her labor populated the world with no one. Human striving cannot deliver the earth. Man’s efforts, Israel’s efforts fail.

Verse 19 is God’s answer, and it is the summit of the song: “Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.” The birth Israel could not accomplish, God accomplishes. The same earth whose barren labor produced only wind (26:18) is made to give birth to the dead, and the word for those dead is *rephaim*, the very word that in verse 14 “will not rise.” There the tyrants stay in the grave; here God’s dead come out of it. The text sets the two verdicts side by side and lets them interpret each other: the resurrection of verse 19 is bodily and personal, real corpses rising from real dust. This is

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

the first installment of the promise we heard at the banquet, that He would “swallow up death for all time” (25:8); verse 19 is where the swallowing begins, at the raising of the righteous dead when Messiah comes. “Awake and shout for joy” is spoken to sleepers in the dust, and they hear it.

Hide Until the Indignation Passes (20–21)

The song closes with a command: “Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; hide for a little while until indignation runs its course” (26:20).

“Indignation,” *za’am*, is a fixed term for the determined wrath of the Day of the LORD; it is the word Isaiah used for the wrath that would be spent on the Assyrian (10:25) and that Daniel was told would run to “the appointed time of the end” (Daniel 8:19, 11:36, “until the indignation is finished”). So, the “little while” is the Tribulation, the poured-out wrath that runs its fixed course. Underneath the command lies the Passover night: Israel shut behind blood-marked doors while the LORD passed through to strike, and the sheltered were passed over (Exodus 12:22–23). The remnant is told to do again what Israel did then, to be hidden while the wrath goes by, which is the same shelter promised at the banquet, “a refuge from the storm” (25:4).

What are the rooms? The text promises real protection through the indignation without specifying its mechanism, and we leave it there, as our method leaves unexplained figures unforced. What matters is the certainty of the shelter, not a diagram of it.

Verse 21 gives the reason the doors must be shut: “For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; and the earth will reveal her bloodshed and will no longer cover her slain.” The LORD comes out to judge, and the ground itself gives up the blood it has absorbed since Abel (Genesis 4:10); the murdered of the ages are no longer hidden, and their blood is answered. The remnant hides from the very wrath that avenges them.

Synthesis with All of Scripture

The Prophets. Daniel gives the closest parallel to verse 19, and in the same vocabulary: “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” (Daniel 12:2). Isaiah’s sleepers in the dust are Daniel’s sleepers in the dust of the ground; both prophets see a literal waking of literal bodies. Daniel also confirms Isaiah’s indignation, telling us the vision belongs to “the appointed time of the end” and to the running of the *za’am* (Daniel 8:19; 11:36). Hosea, whom we reviewed at the banquet, had already promised the ransom from the grave that verse 19 begins to pay: “I will ransom them from the power of Sheol; I will redeem them from death” (Hosea 13:14). Job, earlier still, staked everything on it: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25–26). The hope of a bodily

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

resurrection is not a late idea imported into Isaiah; it is the settled expectation of the righteous from Job forward.

Jesus. The Lord speaks Isaiah's resurrection as plain fact: "an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth" (John 5:28–29), the voice calling the sleepers of 26:19 to awake. And He gives the hiding of verses 20–21 its sharpest form. Warning of the last crisis, He takes Daniel's appointed sign and issues Isaiah's command: "when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place ... then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Matthew 24:15–16). Daniel's indignation, Isaiah's "hide yourself for a little while," and the Lord's "flee to the mountains" are one instruction, given to one remnant, at one moment in the Day of the LORD.

Revelation. John sequences what Isaiah compresses. The resurrection of 26:19 becomes the first resurrection, the raising of the blessed and holy who "came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4–6). The hiding of 26:20 becomes the woman kept safe in the wilderness, nourished "for a time and times and half a time" while the wrath runs (Revelation 12:6, 14). The earth disclosing her slain (26:21) answers the martyrs under the altar who cry, "How long ... will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood?" (Revelation 6:9–10). And the swallowing of death that 26:19 begins is finished when death itself is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14).

The Apostolic Letters. Paul makes the birth-and-resurrection movement of 26:17–19 the shape of the whole creation's hope: the creation "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now," waiting for "the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:22–23), the true birth that Israel's failed labor could not accomplish. And 1 Corinthians 15 is the settled apostolic commentary: Christ "the first fruits" (15:20), then the resurrection at the last trumpet when "the dead will be raised imperishable," and only then the word of 25:8 fulfilled, death is swallowed up in victory (15:52–54). Paul grounds the bodily resurrection on the plain sense of the prophets, and 26:19 is one of the stones he builds on.

Hermeneutic Checkpoints

Start literal. The strong city has real walls that God supplies as salvation; the lofty city goes to real dust; the sleepers rise as real bodies from that same dust; the indignation is a real, fixed period of wrath. At no point in this song does a figurative reading fit.

Let the text interpret itself. Verses 14 and 19 interpret each other. The same word, *rephaim*, is denied resurrection in verse 14 (the dead tyrants "will not rise") and granted it in verse 19 (the earth "will give birth to the *rephaim*"). The deliberate contrast fixes the meaning: verse 19 is a real raising of God's dead, set against the permanent death of their oppressors. And verse 13 names those oppressors so we are not left to guess who stays in the grave.

Isaiah – Chapter 26

The Strong City and the Resurrection of the Dead

Symbol still equals substance. The birth pangs of verses 17–18 are a flagged simile (“as the pregnant woman”), and they point at a concrete reality: Israel’s genuine inability to produce salvation by her own effort. Recognizing the figure costs nothing, because the thing figured is real, the failed human labor answered by a real divine birth in verse 19.

Keep the method consistent. The song binds the city, the resurrection, and the indignation into one hymn. Whoever takes the salvation-built city literally in verse 1 must take the resurrection literally in verse 19 and the indignation literally in verse 20. The method cannot read a literal city and a symbolic rising three movements apart.

A foreshortening checkpoint. The song sees a city already standing (26:1), the dead already raised (26:19), and the remnant still hiding from wrath (26:20) as one range of peaks. The New Testament supplies the valleys: the first resurrection, the indignation (the Tribulation), the standing city of the Kingdom are all separate events that are separated by significant time. This is Prophetic Foreshortening as we defined it: the events held firmly, the timetable held loosely, every peak equally literal, and the later revelation trusted to sort the order the prophet compressed.

Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope. This song carries the Hope less through the Person than through what His reign secures. The King was enthroned on Zion in 24:23 and revealed as Host and Conqueror of death in chapter 25; here we receive what that reign purchases for His people, a city whose wall is salvation, a peace kept for the trusting mind, and the raising of the believer’s own body out of the dust. The Hope has grown from a Child born (9:6) and a Branch ruling (11:1) to a grave emptied, and the voice that empties it is the King’s own (John 5:28). Every earlier promise pointed to a Person; this one seats us, raised, in His city.

The Motif of the City. The contest of cities reaches its verdict. From the *qiryat tohu* of 24:10 to Moab’s fortifications in 25:12, the city of man has been coming down; here the lofty city (*qiryah nisgavah*, 26:5) lies in the dust, trodden by the feet of the helpless it once towered over (26:6). Over against every ruin stands one strong city, and its wall is not stone but salvation, its builder not men but God (26:1). The city of man has no wall left; the city of God will have the ultimate security.

The Holy One of Israel. His holiness and His faithfulness stand together in the song, as they have through every judgment. He is the everlasting Rock who does not erode (26:4) and the keeper of perfect peace (26:3); He is the righteous Judge whose judgments school the earth (26:9) and whose zeal and fire consume His enemies (26:11); and He is the God who raises His own dead (26:19). The same hand that comes out to punish the earth (26:21) shuts the doors of His people first (26:20). Holiness that burns and faithfulness that shelters are one nature, and the song sings both.