

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

Isaiah 24:1, 5, 23. Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface and scatters its inhabitants. ... The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. ... 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.

Context

Last week we paused before entering this chapter, because the entrance matters. Chapters 1–23 have been a lawsuit conducted in widening circles: Judah indicted (1–6), the house of David tested (7–12), and every named nation on the compass brought to the bar (13–23). Chapter 23 closed the docket with Tyre, the last great commercial power. There are no defendants left to name.

Chapter 24 opens not with a *massa'* against a nation but with a bare, terrible announcement: "Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste." The Hebrew *ha'aretz* can mean "the land," and some read this chapter as Judah's devastation only. But the internal evidence pushes against that reading at nearly every turn: the judgment falls on "the world" (*tevel*, v. 4), on "the inhabitants of the earth" without distinction (vv. 1, 5, 6, 17), on "all joy" and every city (vv. 10–12), on "the kings of the earth" *and* "the host of heaven on high" (v. 21). A judgment that reaches the cosmos and terminates in the visible reign of the LORD of hosts on Mount Zion is not a description of Sennacherib's campaign. Isaiah has moved from the particular to the universal, and he has done so deliberately.

This is also where our hermeneutic gets its first real test. We committed last week to four working rules: start literal; let the text interpret itself when it does; symbol still equals substance; keep the method consistent everywhere. Chapter 24 will hand us a reeling earth, an opened heaven, a dungeon for spiritual powers, and an embarrassed sun. We will take each in its plain sense unless the text itself signals otherwise, and we will check every reading against the rest of the Biblical record.

Structure of the Chapter

Isaiah 24 moves in five movements, each tightening the frame:

- 1–3: The announcement: the earth emptied, without regard to station.
- 4–6: The cause: a broken everlasting covenant, and a curse that devours.
- 7–13: The consequence: the city of chaos, silenced joy, and a gleaning remnant.
- 14–16: The interruption: songs from the ends of the earth, and the prophet's own anguish.
- 17–23: The climax: terror, pit, and snare; the earth reeling; the host of heaven imprisoned; the King enthroned on Zion.

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

Exposition

The Earth Emptied (1–3)

Four verbs govern verse 1: the LORD *lays waste, devastates, distorts the surface, and scatters the inhabitants*. The third is worth pausing on. The verb pictures a twisting or contorting of the face of the land itself; this is not merely depopulation but a disfiguring of the created order. The One who "formed it to be inhabited" (Isaiah 45:18) is the One undoing that habitation.

Verse 2 is a list of six social pairings: people and priest, servant and master, maid and mistress, buyer and seller, lender and borrower, creditor and debtor. Every axis by which the ancient world sorted human beings is named and then flattened. Religious office does not exempt; wealth does not exempt; social position does not exempt. This is the same leveling Isaiah announced back in 2:11–17, where "the pride of man will be humbled and the loftiness of men will be abased, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day." Chapter 2 stated the principle. Chapter 24 executes it on a global scale.

Verse 3 grounds all of it in a single clause: "for the LORD has spoken this word." Isaiah will not let us treat this as impersonal catastrophe, historical accident, or the natural consequence of human folly. It is decreed.

The Everlasting Covenant Broken (4–6)

Here is the theological center of the chapter, and one of the most important verses in the section for synthesis with the whole Biblical record.

Verse 4 pairs "the earth" with "the world" (*tevel*), a term that never means a local territory; it means the inhabited globe. And the "exalted of the people of the earth" fade: again, the universal humbling.

Verse 5 gives the indictment in three escalating charges: "they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant." Note that "laws" is plural (*torot*), not "the Law." Isaiah is not accusing the whole earth of failing to keep Sinai. That accusation would be unjust as the world was not under the Law; Amos indicts the nations for atrocities against conscience, not for neglecting the Levitical code.

The phrase that decides the matter is "the everlasting covenant" (*berit olam*). The only covenant in Scripture made with all humanity, and expressly called everlasting, is the Noahic covenant of Genesis 9. There God says, "I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature" (Genesis 9:9–10), and calls it "the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Genesis 9:16). That covenant carried real moral content: the sanctity of human life grounded in the image of God, and the accountability of man for the shedding of blood (Genesis 9:5–6). It also carried a promise, that God would not again destroy the earth by flood.

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

Read this way, verse 5 says something the rest of Scripture confirms: humanity is not judged for failing to be Israel. Humanity is judged for violating the universal moral obligation that has rested on every human being since Noah stepped off the ark. This is precisely Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–32 and 2:14–15, everyone and the nations are without excuse, not because they had Moses, but because they had creation, conscience, and the knowledge of God which they suppressed.

Verse 6 then draws the conclusion: "a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty." The word for curse (*alah*) is covenant-lawsuit vocabulary; it is the sanction attached to a broken oath (compare Deuteronomy 29:19–21). The lawsuit that began in Isaiah 1:2 with heaven and earth summoned as witnesses now returns its verdict against the earth itself.

The City of Chaos and the Silenced Joy (7–13)

The imagery turns domestic and specific: new wine mourns, the vine decays, the merry-hearted sigh, the tambourine and lyre and song cease, wine is bitter to those who drink it. Isaiah judges a civilization by its parties. When the celebrations stop, the culture has died. This is a deliberate inversion of the blessings of Deuteronomy 28 (grain, new wine, oil, gladness withdrawn).

Verse 10 gives us the chapter's most theologically loaded phrase: "the city of chaos is broken down." The Hebrew is *qiryat tohu*, and *tohu* is the word from Genesis 1:2, "formless and void." Isaiah uses it elsewhere for idols and for nothingness (41:29; 44:9). The city has no name. That is the point. Babylon had a name in chapter 13; Tyre had a name in chapter 23. This city is every city of man collapsed into one image, the whole Babylon the Great in human project of building a fortified society independent of God, from Genesis 4:17 through Babel in Genesis 11 to Revelation 18. It is *tohu* because everything constructed becomes completely empty and void.

Every house is shut, there is an outcry in the streets for wine, all joy turns to gloom, the gaiety of the earth is banished, and the gate is battered to ruins (vv. 10–12). The gate was where elders sat, judgment was rendered, and commerce transacted. Its destruction is the collapse of civil order itself.

Then verse 13 opens a window: "For thus it will be in the midst of the earth among the peoples, as the shaking of an olive tree, as the gleanings when the grape harvest is over." Isaiah has used this image before, in 17:6, for the remnant of Israel. Here he applies it "among the peoples," a remnant *from the nations* survives the shaking. That gleanings is what makes the next three verses possible.

Songs from the Ends of the Earth, and the Prophet's Anguish (14–16)

The tone breaks without warning. "They raise their voices, they shout for joy; they cry out from the west concerning the majesty of the LORD. Therefore glorify the LORD in the east,

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, in the coastlands of the sea. From the ends of the earth we hear songs, 'Glory to the Righteous One.'"

West, east, and the ends of the earth: the gleaned remnant of the nations is singing and singing to the God of Israel by name. This is not a footnote. It is the trajectory of the whole book: 2:2–4, all nations streaming to the mountain of the LORD; 19:24–25, Egypt and Assyria blessed alongside Israel; 25:6, a banquet for all peoples; 49:6, the Servant as a light to the nations. The judgment of the earth does not eliminate the nations; it purifies a worshiping remnant out of them. That is exactly what Revelation shows at the same point in its own sequence: "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne" (Revelation 7:9).

And then Isaiah collapses. "But I say, 'Woe to me! Woe to me! Alas for me! The treacherous deal treacherously.'" The Hebrew here is jagged (*razi-li, razi-li*, often rendered "my leanness" or "I waste away"), followed by a fivefold hammering of the root of treachery. The prophet has been given the vision of the singing remnant and the vision of the earth's treachery in the same breath, and the second one crushes him. This is the same man who cried "Woe is me, for I am ruined" in chapter 6. Isaiah never becomes comfortable with judgment.

Terror, Pit, and Snare (17–20)

Verse 17 contains one of the most famous sound plays in the Hebrew Bible: *pachad va-pachad va-pach*, "terror and pit and snare." The three words chime like an alarm bell, and the picture is of hunted game: the man who bolts from the sound of terror falls into the pit, and the man who climbs out of the pit is caught in the snare. There is no exit by human ingenuity. Jeremiah quotes this verse almost verbatim against Moab (Jeremiah 48:43–44), which tells us Isaiah's line was proverbial for inescapable judgment.

Then verse 18 does something extraordinary: "For the windows above are opened, and the foundations of the earth shake." That is Flood language, quoted directly from Genesis 7:11: "the floodgates of the sky were opened." Isaiah has just told us in verse 5 that humanity has broken the Noahic covenant; now he tells us the judgment comes with the Noahic imagery. God promised never again to destroy the earth by water (Genesis 9:11), and He will keep that promise. But the covenant that guaranteed it has been broken by the other party, and the windows of heaven open again for a judgment of a different kind. Peter makes the identical connection: "the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire" (2 Peter 3:6–7).

Verses 19–20 pile up three shatterings ("the earth is broken asunder, the earth is split through, the earth is shaken violently") and then two images of a structure past saving: the earth reels "like a drunkard" and totters "like a shack." A *melunah* is a temporary shelter thrown up in a field during harvest, abandoned when the season ends. The permanence people assume about the world is, from the Creator's vantage, a lean-to in a vineyard.

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

The cause is repeated once more so no one mistakes it: "for its transgression is heavy upon it." Not entropy. Not cosmic accident. Guilt.

The Host of Heaven and the King on Zion (21–23)

The chapter's last section pulls the veil back further than anything we have seen so far.

"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." Two tiers of rebellion are judged in a single act. "The host of heaven" in this construction is not the stars as objects but the spiritual powers: the same realm Deuteronomy 4:19 and 32:8 associate with the nations, that Daniel 10:13,20 shows contending as "princes" behind Persia and Greece, and that Paul names as "the rulers, the powers, the world forces of this darkness, the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). The nations Isaiah has spent eleven chapters proclaiming judgment had powers standing behind them, and those powers are on the docket too.

Verse 22 describes their fate with striking specificity: "They will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon, and will be confined in prison; and after many days they will be punished." Three stages: gathered, confined, and then, after an interval, punished. Judgment is not instantaneous but sequenced. Compare 2 Peter 2:4 ("cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment"), Jude 6 ("kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day"), and most closely Revelation 20:1–3, 7–10, where Satan is bound in the abyss, held there for a bounded period, released, and only then thrown into the lake of fire. Isaiah 24:22 and Revelation 20 describe the same structure: confinement, an interval, final punishment. This is the "let the text interpret itself" rule doing real work. Isaiah gives us the sequence, and the New Testament fills in the timetable.

Verse 23 is the destination the entire chapter has been driving toward. "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."

Three observations.

First, the sun and moon. Consistent with our rule, we take this in its plain sense first, and the plain sense is well attested: the darkening of the heavenly lights is a fixed feature of Day of the LORD prophecy (Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 5:20; Zephaniah 1:15; Matthew 24:29; Revelation 6:12–13). A literal celestial disturbance is exactly what the parallel passages describe. But the verbs Isaiah chooses (abashed, ashamed) add a dimension the other passages do not. These are words of humiliation before a superior. The sun and moon are not merely dimmed; they are outshone and put to shame, because the glory of the reigning LORD makes them superfluous. That is the reading Isaiah himself confirms later: "No longer will you have the sun for light by day, nor for brightness will the moon give you light; but you will have the LORD for an everlasting light" (Isaiah 60:19), and John repeats it in

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

Revelation 21:23. The figure and the literal event are not competitors here. Both are true, and the text supplies the interpretation.

Second, the location. "On Mount Zion and in Jerusalem." After twenty-four chapters of unnamed cities and universal judgment, Isaiah plants the reign in a specific, mappable place. This is where the allegorizing hermeneutic must do violence to the text: if Zion here is only a symbol for the Church or for heaven generally, then the one concrete geographical anchor in the chapter has been dissolved, and there is no principled reason the earlier geography of chapters 13–23 should survive either. Keeping the method consistent means keeping Jerusalem, Jerusalem.

Third, "His glory will be before His elders." The phrase evokes Exodus 24:9–11, where Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel went up the mountain, "and they saw the God of Israel ... and they ate and drank." That scene is the closest Old Testament parallel: elders, a mountain, the visible glory, and a meal. Hold that thought: Isaiah 25:6 opens with a banquet on this same mountain. John sees elders around the throne as well (Revelation 4:4). What was granted to seventy men for one afternoon on Sinai becomes the permanent condition of the Messianic Kingdom.

Synthesis with All of Scripture

The prophets. The Day of the LORD material coheres remarkably. Joel 2:1–11 and 3:14–16 give the same darkened lights, shaking heavens, and the LORD roaring from Zion. Zephaniah 1:2–3, 14–18 gives the same sweeping away of all things from the face of the earth and the same universal scope. Zechariah 14 gives the same terminus, "the LORD will be king over all the earth" (14:9), anchored to the same literal geography. These prophets are not each inventing private imagery; they are describing one event from different angles.

Jesus in the Olivet Discourse. Jesus draws on this material without hesitation: "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky" (Matthew 24:29–30). Note that Jesus keeps both tiers of Isaiah 24:21: the celestial disturbance and the shaking of "the powers of the heavens." He also frames the whole discourse with Noah: "as were the days of Noah, so will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:37). Isaiah 24 pairs the broken Noahic covenant with the opened floodgates; Jesus pairs the days of Noah with His own return. The Lord Himself read this chapter the way we are reading it.

Revelation. The parallels are dense and in the same order: universal judgment on the inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 6–16), the fall of the city of man (Revelation 18, which quotes Isaiah 23 and Ezekiel 27 directly), a great multitude from every nation singing (Revelation 7:9–10, answering Isaiah 24:14–16), the binding of the spiritual powers with an interval before final punishment (Revelation 20:1–10, answering Isaiah 24:21–22), and the

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

visible reign of the King with no need of sun or moon (Revelation 21:23, answering Isaiah 24:23). John is not borrowing Isaiah's decorations. He is describing the same events with the same structure.

Apostolic letters. "Creation was subjected to futility ... groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Romans 8:20–22) is the theological explanation of Isaiah 24:4–6: the ground itself bears the weight of human transgression. "The elements will be destroyed with intense heat" (2 Peter 3:10–13), set explicitly against the Flood as precedent, is Isaiah 24:18–20 carried to its conclusion. Peter ends where Isaiah ends, with "new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells."

Hermeneutic Checkpoints

Let us apply the four rules from last week explicitly, since this chapter is the test case.

Start literal. "The earth" means the earth. The burden of proof lies on anyone who wants to shrink *tebel* in verse 4 to the territory of Judah, and nothing in the chapter carries that burden. The reach into the angelic realm in verse 21 makes the local reading impossible.

Let the text interpret itself. Verse 23 tells us why the sun and moon are humiliated: "*for the LORD of hosts will reign.*" The chapter supplies its own reason, so we do not have to speculate. Likewise, verse 5 identifies the covenant as everlasting, and Genesis 9:16 supplies the only candidate. We are not decoding; we are reading.

Symbol still equals substance. The reeling drunkard and the harvest shack in verse 20 are plainly similes; the text signals them with "like." Recognizing that costs us nothing, because the similes describe a real event: an actual, future, physical shaking of the earth, described by comparison. The figure is the vehicle; the destination is literal.

Keep the method consistent. If we take the imprisonment of the host of heaven (v. 22) as a real future event, we must also take the reign on Mount Zion (v. 23) as a real future event, and vice versa. We do not get to literalize the judgment and spiritualize the Kingdom. That inconsistency (literal curses, symbolic blessings) is precisely the error we flagged last week, and this chapter will not permit it. The same verse that ends the rebellion of the powers seats the King in Jerusalem.

One honest caution. Verse 22's "after many days" is not given a length here, and we should not manufacture one from this verse. Revelation 20 supplies a figure; Isaiah supplies only the sequence. Where Scripture is silent about duration, we hold the sequence firmly and the timetable loosely.

Tying the Threads Together

The Messianic Hope. In chapter 9 the Hope was a Child born; in chapter 11 a Branch ruling in righteousness; in chapter 16 a throne established in lovingkindness; in chapter 19 a Savior sent to Egypt. In chapter 24 the Hope is a reign: visible, geographical, and universal. "The

Isaiah – Chapter 24

The Earth Judged

LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders." Every earlier promise pointed to a Person; this one shows us the Person seated. And He does not reign in the abstract. He reigns after the powers behind the nations have been imprisoned and the kings of the earth judged. That is to say, His Kingdom arrives on the far side of a real, historical, future judgment, not by the gradual improvement of the present order.

The Motif of the City. The contest has run through the whole book: Babylon, Damascus, Tyre, and even Jerusalem in the Valley of Vision, set against the Zion that God chose. Chapter 24 resolves it by removing the names. Every city of man becomes one unnamed *qiryat tohu*, broken down, its gate battered to ruins. And exactly one city keeps its name. The city of man loses its identity in judgment; the City of God keeps hers in glory.

The Holy One of Israel. The lawsuit that began with "Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth" (1:2) returns its verdict in chapter 24 against heaven and earth alike. The witnesses have become the defendants. His holiness has proven wide enough to indict every nation and deep enough to reach the powers standing behind them; His faithfulness has proven durable enough that a gleaner survives from every direction of the compass, singing "Glory to the Righteous One." That is the God we meet in chapter 25, spreading a table on the same mountain where He has just been enthroned.

The Day of the LORD: Isaiah's Vision of Universal Judgment and Glory

