

A Tale of Two Cities

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 April 2024

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Oh man, let's come and listen to the Lord teach us his ways and his word now. Let's pray that he would do that as we have his word open.

Gracious Father, we thank you once again that you call us to come to listen to you. And so we pray, Lord, that you would give us ears to hear, that you would give us hearts to receive what you have to say to us tonight.

We thank you, Father, that your servant Isaiah said that your word was like rain and snow coming from heaven. And just like the rain waters the earth and brings forth life and growth and seeds. Lord, so we pray that tonight your word would come and it would not return to you empty, but that it would give life and growth and that we would bear fruit as we receive.

It by faith. For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. I said last week, Isaiah is in lots of ways a tale of two cities.

[1 : 10] Our passage tonight really brings that out. It's a big book, but really the whole of Isaiah, his whole vision, is about a journey from sin city to the celestial city.

Remember in chapter one, we're still in the long introduction, if you like. This is still the overture. The curtain hasn't gone up on this production yet. Or to change the metaphor slightly, we could say that Isaiah is like a painter just preparing his canvas, just putting on layers of primer before he begins to fill in the color, the detail, the texture of his vision.

But even now in this introduction, we can see where Isaiah is going, the outline of it. And we can see how God is going to make it true.

How does God bring us from the city that is to the city that will be? From the earthly Jerusalem to the heavenly Jerusalem? Well, Isaiah says in our passage tonight, or he gives us a taste of it, that God will save his people through judgment.

How God redeems his people. It's a huge theme in the book of Isaiah. He'll unpack it lots as we go along. But we get the first sketch of it here, that the sovereign God saves his people through judgment.

[2 : 45] And at one end and the other of that great work, we see, don't we, sin city and the celestial city. The city that is, the city that will be, and how God will bring us from one to the other.

So let's dig into these broad brushstrokes together then, beginning with sin city. We started last week at the cinema at the start of Isaiah. We're going back there tonight, but for quite a different picture.

One of my favorite film trilogies, I've got a few, is the Dark Knight trilogy. For those of you who don't know, that's Batman. And if you know anything about Batman, you know that he fights crime in Gotham City.

It's clearly modeled on New York. Just picture that if you have not seen it. And early on in the Dark Knight, you see a young Bruce Wayne, the guy who's going to grow up to be Batman, kind of cruising along this super high-tech tram system with his mum and dad, in this clean and thriving and prosperous city.

And at the heart of the city is a gleaming bright skyscraper, the skyscraper of Wayne Enterprises, his dad's business, which is pumping wealth into the city.

[4 : 07] People have work and incomes. He's a bit of a philanthropist, so money is going to the most vulnerable in society. The right people are in office.

And so the criminal justice system is working. Organized crime is under control. It's a beautiful place where justice is upheld. The city is flourishing under that good governance.

But then Bruce Wayne's dad is killed. And in the short time that it takes for Bruce to grow up, the city falls off a cliff. Wayne Enterprises goes into decline.

The money isn't going to the right things as it once was. And so an underground economy emerges. Organized crime resurges.

Corruption creeps into the police force. The courts are too afraid to take on the big mafia bosses. And as a result of that, the vulnerable and the poor are left defenseless.

[5 : 09] I think that's a really evocative image of a city that collapses. Because righteousness and justice and the rule of law has been lost.

The letter and the spirit of it. That's the fall of Gotham City. That's the kind of thing we should have in mind as we see how our passage tonight begins. Just look at verse 21.

Where Isaiah says, See how the faithful city has become a prostitute. She was once full of justice. Righteousness used to dwell in her.

But now murderers. A once faithful city become a faithless city. It could be Gotham City, but it isn't. The shock factor is this. That it is God's city. It's the capital of his kingdom, Jerusalem. Remember, Isaiah is writing a long time ago. Back in the kind of 700s BC.

[6 : 11] And this isn't prophecy in the sense of talking about Jerusalem today. This is the Jerusalem of his day. At once upon a time, he says, It was a faithful city.

Under the righteous reigns of King David and his son Solomon the Wise, Jerusalem thrived. God's law was upheld and followed. The king sat in righteous judgments.

They heard the cases brought by the whole cross-section of society, young and old, men and women, rich and poor, and decided fairly and with justice between them.

The vulnerable were protected. The violent were held to account. Wealth flowed to the palace and the temple from the nations and back out into the life of God's people.

But those days are long gone, says Isaiah. 200 years have passed, and the kings that came after David and Solomon were not always cut from the same cloth.

[7 : 12] Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was foolish. And under his reign, the kingdom split in two, so that by now Jerusalem is the capital of a romp of a kingdom, rather than a sprawling and prosperous empire.

And in a sense, says Isaiah, the rest was history. Righteousness has been forced out of the neighborhood, and murderers have moved in.

The currency has lost its value. Their silver is dross. The choice products of the region have become knockoff brands. To put verse 22 in terms that we might understand, it would be like saying today, you can't get a single malt.

All they're producing is blended whiskey, choice wine diluted with water. That would be a sad story, wouldn't it? Of incredible national collapse and decline.

But that is where God's city is at this point in history. And even worse, what about their leaders? Your rulers, he says, are rebels, partners with thieves. They all love bribes and chase after gifts.

[8 : 26] They don't defend the cause of the father. And the widow's case does not come before them. So the very people in the city who are charged with keeping order, punishing the guilty, defending the weak, are in bed with the mafia.

They sell themselves to the highest bidder. And so, he says, the weak and the vulnerable, the fatherless and the widow, they don't ever get their day in court. If they can't grease the wheels of justice with a bribe, well, the wheels of justice just don't turn for them.

And so, within a few generations, God's city, the faithful city, has become sin city, the faithless city. We're left asking, how did that happen? Well, trace it all back, says Isaiah, and this is where it all started going wrong, verse 21.

When the faithful city became a prostitute. I hinted last week that what's going wrong with God's people at this point in time is that they are getting into bed with people, kings, nations, and other things that are not the God that they are supposed to be in relationship with.

[9 : 46] Here, Isaiah puts it bluntly, doesn't he? They are like a once faithful and devoted wife who has started selling herself to whoever was willing to pay.

And in doing that, she is thrown open the door of the family home to untold corruption and sin. See, the heart of this fall of this city, it's not at heart a political problem or an economic problem.

It is a spiritual problem, a problem in the people's relationship with their God that is in turn corroding every aspect of the life of God's people in his city.

Nothing is untouched. Now, it's not difficult, is it, to see parallels with our own nation, cities that we see in Scotland today in some ways.

Scotland is not a theocracy as Israel was, but we do have, don't we, a history, a legacy of knowing God and his word. This was known once as the land of the book.

[10 : 55] But as our capital, our governments, our legal system, our people drift further from God and his word, well, we see, don't we, how that faithlessness filters down into the laws that are passed, the ways that money is spent and misspent, the apparent self-interest of the people who are charged with the care of our nation, the lack of interest in protecting the most vulnerable in our land.

You only have to look at statistics to do with drug and alcohol-related deaths to see that, the bill, the assisted dying bill that's coming through Holyrood just now.

But brothers and sisters, the sharper edge of these verses is actually pointing in here at the church. Scotland isn't Israel, but the church is very much the spiritual heir of God's people back then. And so this vision of sin city shows us still more clearly what happens when a church and its leaders drift from God and his word.

When we begin an emotional affair, if not an actual physical affair, with things that we think can save us or bring us security in life, other gods with a lowercase g, other saviors with a lowercase s, well, the distinctive quality of our life together begins to collapse in on itself.

[12 : 36] Instead of right relationships, we give into selfishness and self-interest. What suits number one comes first. We focus on people who benefit us in some way rather than spending time with people who we think have nothing to offer us but their problems.

We stop giving our money to the cause of God's kingdom and the help and support of the weak. We split into factions and begin to argue for what suits us best in church rather than what is good and right for others.

The hope that we have to offer becomes watered down and empty. When people come into contact with the church, they are supposed to be walking into the faithful city and new humanity, a reborn society.

And yet looking around at the church in our city or in the shire or across our nation or perhaps even our experience of churches, we know how easy it is for the church itself to become nothing more than the world wearing its Sunday best.

An outpost of sin city instead of an outpost of heaven. Now, I trust that Isaiah would not say those same words of us at Bon Accord right now.

[14 : 12] Now, we as a church do strive, don't we, to be faithful to God, to listen to his word and to live by it, to respond in faith and repentance. But to the extent that sin still lives in each of us and that sin does seep out into our relationships together as a church family, well, we do need, don't we, to take note and never think that we could not become the sin city that was then.

Here's the church of Isaiah's day was or churches today have become. In fact, if we do think that, we're already kind of halfway there because it's that very same arrogance, that self-reliance and presumption that brought God's city to that place back then rather than a faithful dependence and reliance on God to give us security and life and salvation.

And so where does sin city go from here? Well, next, God says he will save his people through judgment. We see that from verse 24.

Therefore, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel declares, I will vent my wrath on my foes, avenge myself on my enemies. I will turn my hand against you.

I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning. Afterwards, you will be called the faithful city, the city of righteousness.

[15 : 52] So there is a hope, says the Lord. The game is not over. There is a happy ending to the story. The city where righteousness used to dwell will be the city of righteousness once again.

The once faithful city will again be the faithful city. But how will that happen? Well, the first thing to notice is who is speaking?

Who's speaking? It is the Lord, the powerful God, the King. Better still, it is the Lord, capitals, almighty.

That is the personal God in all his power. The covenant God who is the Mighty One of Israel. This is what he declares. So who's speaking?

Well, this is the faithful husband of the bride. This is the covenant God who is true. And he is speaking in all his sovereign power.

[16:54] And his words match his tone, don't they? Just count the number there. I wills in verses 25 and 26. How many times does he assert what he will do for his people?

I count four in English, six in Hebrew. I will vent and avenge. I will turn. I will thoroughly purge and remove.

I will restore. So who's going to turn it round? Well, if sin city is going to be the faithful city again, the Lord makes it clear that it is him who's going to do it.

And not us. And not even a team effort. But the Mighty One will act sovereignly to save his people. But how?

Well, this is where it gets interesting, isn't it? Because where he begins, back in verse 24, it doesn't sound to us very much like saving. I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies.

[18:03] I will turn my hand against you. So his enemies and foes there, they are his people or his city.

And it sounds very much, doesn't it, like he's going to finish what he started back in verse 9, before he left some survivors. But now it sounds like they're going the same way as Sodom and Gomorrah. Except, verse 25, what is the effect of God turning his hand against them, Luke? I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities.

The effect of God's turning his hand against them is that the people will be purged of their corruption, purify it. Now, I looked up this week how hot you have to heat gold in order to purify it. Google said it is 1,064 degrees Celsius. Your dinner burns at 200. 1,000 degrees Celsius is still not hot enough to purify gold.

[19:15] So that is what God's blazing hot anger in verse 24 is designed to do for his people. As he vents his wrath on his foes, sin city is being purged and purified of its sin.

Now, to be clear, that is not speaking at a personal level. God does not purify our hearts or sanctify us in his anger. If we are in Christ, God's anger against us has been completely satisfied.

There is none left over for us at all. He is speaking at a corporate level. God purifying his city, his people collectively by his anger, removing those who are against him from the family of his faithful people.

And the last I will there in verse 26, it completes this turnaround that God is doing in his city, that their leaders and rulers will be restored at the beginning, a new renewed Davidic dynasty on the throne.

Or as Isaiah will put it later, even more pointedly, a new David is coming. Then he says, when I have done that, you will be again the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

[20:43] So can we see what Isaiah means now by salvation through judgment? Think about it. Gotham City could not be cleaned up without the bad guys getting put away.

The judge has to throw the book at the criminals in order for the defenseless to be saved. Wrong cannot be allowed to get away with it if right and good relationships and lives are allowed to grow and flourish.

And so God promises he will save those who have turned from their sin to him by judging those who have turned their backs on him.

Zion will be delivered with justice, his penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish.

So as unlikely as it looked, there were still people in Jerusalem, Sin City at that time, who were true to their first love even when the city as a whole had become a spiritual brothel.

[21:58] And God promises in his power to save those who love him by tearing down that brothel and putting their owners on trial. Again, there are implications, aren't there, for our cities, our nation today.

Like God told Elijah, not so long before the days of Isaiah, I still have 7,000 people whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.

Well, so now we know, as unlikely as it sometimes seems, the Lord still has people in our nation, in every city and town who have turned from their sin to him, who have set their love upon him, who worship him faithfully, who are true to his word.

And as difficult as it gets to be a Christian in Scotland today, as bleak as the picture seems, we need to remember that God says that will not be the case forever.

He is the just judge of all the earth and he will do what is right and he will do what is needed to save his people.

[23 : 12] But as we thought before, sharper perhaps are the implications for the church. For like God looked at his city and found enemies within it, so today he finds resistance still within his church.

And this is a reminder, isn't it, if we needed it, that simply being in church or coming to church or even being part of a church doesn't put us right with God any more than simply living in Jerusalem at that time made you a faithful Israelite.

Israelite. God looks, doesn't he, at the hearts and the lives of his people and he is well able to tell who has turned to him in faith and who has not.

And we might be able to convince each other of our Christianity, but we cannot convince God that we're Christians until we really are.

Indeed, until we do turn to him from our self-reliance and our other saviors and put our trust wholeheartedly in him, well, he counts us his enemies and he says we are under his judgments.

[24 : 27] And when he does come to judge, he says, then you will be ashamed of your sacred oaks in which you've delighted. You'll be disgraced because of the gardens you've chosen. He's talking there about idol worship, the false saviors and gods that the people turn to you.

And so when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead, how shameful would it be for some of us who have been in church and heard his word, maybe for weeks or months or years even, to have our false hopes and securities laid bare and the real love of our heart made obvious to all.

We would hate for our hearts to be exposed like that today, but the only way to keep it from coming to light is to ditch those false hopes and saviors now and set your heart fully upon the Lord who saves today.

Until we do that, unless we do that, otherwise, says Isaiah, you are like a dead tree or like a withered garden. And our efforts to convince God otherwise are self-defeating, he says, as dry wood setting light to itself.

The mighty man will become tender and his work a spark. Both will burn together with no one to quench the fire. You think your religious efforts are getting you somewhere with me, says Isaiah, says God, but really, it is like setting your own life on fire.

[26 : 08] And so, however many times we've sat in church, perhaps this is your first time, or perhaps it's your thousandth time or your ten thousandth time, your billionth time in church, if tonight you know that your heart is divided and you are hedging your bets and trying to keep your options open, well, let's be clear, let's not pretend that we will be okay simply because we're in a church or we've been to church or grown up in a church.

We need to turn our whole hearts to the Lord and trust in him completely for our security and our salvation. because God saves his bride by judging his enemies and there is no in between.

The good news is that we all, you, whoever you are, can be part of his faithful, devoted, and loving bride. What makes us his true and devoted people is not our goodness.

It is not our good works as I have just said, that is like a spark setting light to a dry bit of wood. It is acknowledging our sin before him, saying we have no other savior and no other hope, no other security in life or in eternity and turning to him as our only hope and salvation because he is the only God and savior and there is no other.

So why continue to be his enemy? God has promised in his sovereign power to take what was once sin city and save it and we should want to be part of that because that city will become, he says, the celestial city.

[28 : 09] This brings us to our final point tonight. Let's see that. The celestial city. Some of you will recognize that name from Pilgrim's Progress. That's where Pilgrim is headed on his journey through the Christian life.

And it is a fitting description, I think, of what Isaiah saw concerning Jerusalem in chapter 2 and in other places because what he's talking about has never been seen in history.

He's seeing something that was coming in the future for him. He's talking about in the last days, look, verse 2. And in New Testament terms, we understand that that is the time between Jesus' resurrection and his return.

So that is the days that we are living in. And he says, in our time, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains. Now again, I had a look this week.

Google is my friend. Mount Zion is currently 765 meters tall. The highest mountain, Mount Everest, is 8,849 meters tall.

[29 : 17] That's 11 and a half times taller. Now that is trivia. But it illustrates that we are not meant to take this vision as being about the earthly city of Jerusalem itself, but the heavenly Jerusalem.

God's dwelling place, the seat of his rule, will be lifted high, says Isaiah, and all nations will stream to it. And not with weapons to destroy it as they had been doing, but rather saying, verse 3, come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways that we might walk in his paths. Because now, as hadn't been happening in Sin City, now in the celestial city, the law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

As had not been happening under the corrupt kings and rulers, now in God's city, he will judge between the nations and settle disputes for many peoples.

So that instead of the constant threat of war, which was pushing his people towards these false hopes and securities and saviors, well now they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

[30 : 42] And nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. This is what it will be like, says Isaiah, in the city of righteousness.

The Lord himself will teach the nations. The Lord himself will rule over those who come to him with justice. The Lord himself will save them by his righteousness.

And as a result, the nations will have peace and his people will have the security that they have longed for. It's a beautiful vision, isn't it?

That is way beyond anything that we've seen in that physical plot of land. If anything, it's such a sad contrast to see what is happening in that nation today compared to Isaiah's vision.

Because this vision is not fulfilled in the earthly Jerusalem, but in the heavenly Jerusalem. So how do we see this coming true today in the last days?

[31 : 51] Well, where do we see the nations streaming to God's dwelling place and to the seat of his kingly rule to learn from him and to be ruled over by him, to come and be at peace with him and with each other?

Well, look around. Look around. We see that happening when people come to Jesus. people enter the faithful city when they become faithful members of the church.

You know, on Thursday night we had a meeting and someone said something like this, that one of the things that marks out the church is that there's no way that we'd all be here for anything else but Jesus. And that's so true, isn't it?

When Isaiah said the nations will stream to God's temple to learn from the Lord, I wonder if he could ever have imagined the world that we live in today, the diversity of people who would one day gather as we are before the throne of Christ to hear from him.

Like the people of Sin City, we have come, haven't we, looking for security and protection, for safety and rescue, in a word, for salvation.

[33 : 11] The one and only difference is that we have found security and salvation in the Lord Jesus. And like the disciples once said to him, so we say today, Lord, who else will we go to?

Because you have the words of eternal life. So speak, Lord, teach us that we might learn your ways and walk in your paths, rule over us, test our hearts, settle our arguments, give us peace.

You wouldn't blow Isaiah's mind to think that we could go to any country on earth today and find people who have turned to Jesus and said exactly that. And so the church today is a show home for the celestial city, an outpost of God's kingdom.

You could even see a taste of heaven on earth. death. But that is not where the story ends because, of course, that partial fulfillment now anticipates the fullest fulfillment in the city that is still to come.

A city which, as we heard earlier, there is no temple in it because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. a city which, as we heard, needs no sun and moon because the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are its light and the nations will walk by its light.

[34 : 44] a city into which we heard the nations would bring their splendor and honor and in which there will be eternal security or no day will its gates ever be shut.

The doors won't be locked because there will be no night there. A city which, as we heard, there will be eternal purity. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

It will be a city that has been saved through judgment. The final judgment of God's enemies and their exclusion from his city, yes, but also, of course, through the judgment of the sins of the citizens of that city because it is not as it are pure hearts and clean hands that get us there.

How do we ascend the hill of the Lord? It is not because we're fit to do that or we're right to do that, but our trust is in the one who has clean hands and the pure hearts, the Lord Jesus, who saves us by his righteousness, who took our sins on himself on the cross to be judged guilty in our place and to satisfy God's anger against us so that when we turn from our sins and put our trust squarely in him, we are saved through his judgment.

Our hearts and hands are cleansed and purified by him and by his work on the cross to live forever in that celestial city in that new Jerusalem.

[36 : 34] Jerusalem. And so, says Isaiah, come descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord. if your trust is in Christ tonight, then Isaiah says, live in the light of this glorious work.

Live in the light of this vision. Live in the light of the gospel that it promises. Live in the light of the city that you are heading to. Live in light of the promise that God has made to save his people and redeem us from sin forever.

And let's not neglect as we do that to hold out that hope to others. Isaiah's vision and message is not that God will beam us up and leave the world to go to hell.

It is, isn't it, that he will raise up Christ so that all peoples and nations might stream to him. And as we have come to him to learn his ways to walk in them and to delight in him, well, let us hold out that hope to those around us in this world.

Yes, God will judge, but he promises that he will save too. And so if your trust is not yet resting in Christ, well, let me say, tonight has been a lot to take in, but do not let it rest here.

[38 : 04] Okay, do not put it off until the day of judgment when it will be too late, but turn to him now and rest the whole weight of your life on Christ.

Find your security, your salvation in him, your identity, all that you're worth, your protection and your hope. Be part of his people.

Enter his city. Have his protection, his rule over you. Learn from him. Be part of his bride to whom God has pledged his love forever and ever.

So let's come to him and thank him now. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you. Almighty God, we thank you that you in all your sovereign power have promised to save.

Lord, we thank you because we know that we could not save ourselves. Lord, our works are like filthy rags and they are like sparks that set light to our own self-righteousness.

[39 : 16] Lord, we know that apart from your sovereign grace, your promise in Christ that we would be doomed and we would be condemned.

But how we praise you, Lord, that you have promised salvation through your Son. How we thank you, Lord, that he was judged in our place. That, Lord, you carried out the demands of justice as he hung on the cross so that we might live in your forever city.

Father, let our hearts never cease to give you praise and thanks for your gospel, for the work of Christ. Lord, let us hold that out to others, we pray. And, Father, we pray that you would break down any barrier that is holding any of us back from him tonight.

Lord, how we pray that we would each find a home in your heavenly city and in the new world that you promised those who love him. For this we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.