

# **FINAL JUDGMENT OF EVIL**

**ISAIAH 24-27**

Introduction to chapters 24-27

The opening verse (24:1) indicates the focus of these chapters, which is on God's final judgment of evil, whatever historical form it may take. This forms a fitting conclusion to a section that has pronounced the divine judgment against the nations that have acted against God's chosen people. It is a small step to widen the scope of the judgment to speak of God's judgment of any and every power that proudly acts against his will. Brevard Childs in *Isaiah* (The Old Testament Library, Westminster, John Knox Press, 2001 page 173), speaks of chapters 24-27 as 'divine admonition and encouragement to a community of faith living under great pressure and struggling to discern in its historical experiences the ways of God in human lives.'

**<sup>1</sup>Now YHWH is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.**

**<sup>2</sup>And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor.**

**<sup>3</sup>The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for YHWH has spoken this word. <sup>4</sup>The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. <sup>5</sup>The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.**

The world lies under God's judgment  
(24:1-13)

Such a universal judgment has been indicated already:

They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, YHWH and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole earth ... I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants.

– Isaiah 13:5, 11

All you inhabitants of the world, you who live on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look! When a trumpet is blown, listen!

– Isaiah 18:3

Babylon continues to be the paradigm. Talk of scattering the inhabitants of the earth (verse 1) recalls the story of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

'Everlasting covenant' (b<sup>c</sup>rît 'ôlām, verse 5) is an expression found in God's covenant with Noah (see Genesis 9:16). Compare:

YHWH saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

– Genesis 6:5

This is the reversal of God's original blessing for the human family to 'be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth' (Genesis 9:1). Compare Isaiah 13:12.

The word 'chaos' (tōhû, verse 10) recalls the primeval chaos 'before' God's creative ordering. The 'city' is any and every city, including those that have featured in the last eleven chapters. The primary example is Babylon and the poem may have been composed in the years just before its fall to Cyrus II of Persia (539).

There is no lack of liturgical celebrations, but a dearth of faithfulness – a theme chosen for inclusion in the opening chapter of the scroll (see Isaiah 1:12-17).

We are meant to recall the primeval flood (Genesis 7:11).

This picks up the imagery which opened the chapter (see 24:1).

**<sup>6</sup>Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left. <sup>7</sup>The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. <sup>8</sup>The mirth of the timbrels is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. <sup>9</sup>No longer do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.**

**<sup>10</sup>The city of chaos is broken down, every house is shut up so that no one can enter. <sup>11</sup>There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has reached its eventide; the gladness of the earth is banished. <sup>12</sup>Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins. <sup>13</sup>For thus it shall be on the earth and among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is ended. <sup>14</sup>They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; they shout from the west over the majesty of YHWH. <sup>15</sup>Therefore in the east give glory to YHWH; in the coastlands of the sea glorify the name of YHWH, the God of Israel. <sup>16</sup>From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One. But I say, I pine away, I pine away. Woe is me! For the treacherous deal treacherously, the treacherous deal very treacherously.**

**<sup>17</sup>Terror, and the pit, and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth! <sup>18</sup>Whoever flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit; and whoever climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. <sup>19</sup>The earth is utterly broken, the earth is torn asunder, the earth is violently shaken. <sup>20</sup>The earth staggers like a drunkard, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again.**

**24:21 On that day YHWH will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth.**

**22 They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.**

**23 Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for YHWH of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.**

**25:1 YHWH, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.**

**2 For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you.**

**4 For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a flood pounding a wall, 5 the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.**

Verses 21-23 appear to be a much later addition with themes that belong to the apocalyptic literature that emerged in the second century BC and continued on through the New Testament period and afterwards. This includes the notion of the fall and imprisonment of rebellious heavenly powers (the stars were thought of as living, intelligent beings composed of fire, the most refined element). We find this imagery in the Book of Revelation (9:2, 11).

The punishment of those in heaven and on earth who oppose YHWH is seen as YHWH's action to redeem Judah and Jerusalem – a theme that we have found in the previous chapters (see 14:1-2, 32; 18:7). The final line is an allusion to the scene where God reveals his glory to the elders on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:9-11).

#### A Thanksgiving Psalm (25:1-5)

YHWH's redeeming of Judah by bringing about the destruction of the cities that one after another have oppressed God's people is the subject of a psalm of praise and thanksgiving. The city is anonymous, and those chanting the psalm would think of different cities depending on their situation.

Reference to YHWH's plans is typical of Isaiah (see 9:5; 10:5-19; 14:24-27). On the destruction of those hostile to YHWH's plans see 5:14; 13:11. On YHWH's reducing their cities to rubble see 17:1; 23:13.

Verse 4 goes to the heart of Yahwism's theology. We recall the following:

YHWH will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its places of assembly a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a canopy. It will serve as a pavilion, a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

– Isaiah 4:5-6

## Communion of all peoples with God (25:6-8)

After all the talk of YHWH's punishing Judah's enemies, this extraordinary piece is a timely reminder that punishment is always in view of bringing people to acknowledge YHWH and to receive life from him. We are accustomed to hearing this in relation to Israel, but here the prophet is speaking about 'all peoples' (25:6,7), 'all nations' (25:7), 'all faces' (25:8), 'all the earth' (25:8). The background seems to be a liturgical celebration of the universal lordship of YHWH, probably on the occasion of the pilgrimage festival of Booths (see Zechariah 14:16).

Equally extraordinary is the statement that YHWH will 'swallow up death forever' (quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54) 'and wipe away the tears from all faces' (quoted in Revelation 7:17; 21:4). We have to wait for the second century BC to find explicit statements of belief in a personal life beyond death, whether it be restricted to the just (see Daniel 12:2), or influenced by the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul (see Wisdom 2:33-34). It is also true that there are many statements in the Hebrew Bible that express the presumption that life, real life, ends with death (see Psalm 88:3-5; Psalm 115:17; Isaiah 38:18-19; Sirach 17:27-28). Our present text may have been composed in the second century BC, but that is not at all certain. It may join other statements in suggesting a much earlier hope that, since God is faithful, there must be more to our communion with God than what we experience this side of the grave.

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

– Psalm 16:9-11

God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

– Psalm 49:15

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

– Psalm 73:23-26

We will return to this when examining Isaiah 26:19.

**<sup>6</sup>On this mountain YHWH of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.**

**<sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. <sup>8</sup>Then the Lord YHWH will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for YHWH has spoken.**

**<sup>9</sup>It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is YHWH for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. <sup>10</sup>For the hand of YHWH will rest on this mountain.**

**<sup>10</sup>The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit. <sup>11</sup>Though they spread out their hands in the midst of it, as swimmers spread out their hands to swim, their pride will be laid low despite the struggle of their hands. <sup>12</sup>The high fortifications of his walls will be brought down, laid low, cast to the ground, even to the dust.**

**<sup>1</sup>On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; he sets up victory like walls and bulwarks.**

**<sup>2</sup>Open the gates, so that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. <sup>3</sup>Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace – in peace because they trust in you. <sup>4</sup>Trust in YHWH forever, for in YH, in YHWH you have an everlasting rock.**

**<sup>5</sup>For he has brought low the inhabitants of the height; the lofty city he lays low. He lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust. <sup>6</sup>The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy.**

A Second Thanksgiving Psalm  
(25:9-10)

Against Moab (25:10-12)

Someone inserted here this dreadful statement against the Moabites. Whatever the context, it must rank as one of the most violent and repulsive statements in the Isaiah scroll, already with more than its share of violent images. When we read it we need to hear Jesus say:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

– Matthew 5:43-45

A Third Thanksgiving Psalm  
(26:1-6)

Here the psalmist reverts to thanking YHWH for reversing the fortunes of Judah by bringing about the downfall of Judah's oppressors.

The poor have been trampled down. Now they trample down their oppressors.

Keep believing: God will intervene  
(26:7 – 27:1)

YHWH's promises to his people have not yet been realised because YHWH has had to keep on punishing his people, chastising them so that they might learn to be faithful. Judah must continue to wait and to call upon YHWH.

YHWH has also punished Israel's oppressors, but they have not learned. The psalmist prays that the fire created by the adversaries of Israel – and therefore the adversaries of YHWH ('your adversaries', verse 11) – will turn back on them and consume them (verse eleven is quoted in Hebrews 10:27). YHWH continues to show favour to his people. This is the source of their hope that the promises made to them will, one day, come about, and they will experience 'peace' (verse 12).

Israel's enemies have been destroyed by God and they will never rise again. It is different with Israel. The psalmist goes on to recall the empire of David when YHWH 'enlarged all the borders of the land' (verse 15).

**<sup>7</sup>The way of the righteous is level; O Just One, you make smooth the path of the righteous. <sup>8</sup>In the path of your judgments, YHWH, we wait for you; your name and your renown are the soul's desire.**

**<sup>9</sup>My soul yearns for you in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. <sup>10</sup>If favour is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness they deal perversely and do not see the majesty of YHWH.**

**<sup>11</sup>YHWH, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people, and be ashamed. Let the fire for your adversaries consume them. <sup>12</sup>YHWH, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us.**

**<sup>13</sup>YHWH our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but we acknowledge your name alone. <sup>14</sup>The dead do not live; shades do not rise – because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them.**

**<sup>15</sup>But you have increased the nation, YHWH, you have increased the nation; you are glorified; you have enlarged all the borders of the land.**

Evil will be destroyed

**<sup>16</sup>YHWH, in distress they sought you, they poured out a prayer when your chastening was on them.**

**<sup>17</sup>Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, YHWH; <sup>18</sup>we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world. <sup>19</sup>Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.**

**<sup>20</sup>Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past. <sup>21</sup>For YHWH comes out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no longer cover its slain.**

**<sup>27:1</sup>On that day YHWH with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea.**

He now recalls the punishment that YHWH had to inflict upon Israel. Their suffering is compared to the pangs of a woman in labour. Of themselves YHWH's people can do nothing: they can give birth only to wind. But they are not on their own. YHWH, who has chastised them, is with them, and, unlike their oppressors, their nation will continue to rise from the dead. The return from exile in Babylon was experienced as just such a miraculous rising from the dead.

The psalmist is calling on all those who have gone before, and who have lived and died clinging to God's promise, to 'awake and sing for joy', for YHWH will intervene to achieve his design, and Israel will experience the fulfilment of YHWH's promise. Like the earlier statement in 25:7-8, this text is not clear enough to be a witness to belief in a personal afterlife. The poetic form suggests a metaphorical interpretation. However, the Septuagint uses future verbs to translate 'awake and sing for joy'. By the second century belief in a future resurrection and life after death was being expressed by some groups within the Jewish community. The question was still being debated between the Sadducees and Pharisees in the first century AD (see Acts 23:8).

In verses 20-21 the psalm concludes with an assurance that YHWH will punish those who have oppressed his people. Their blood cries out to be avenged, and their cry will be heard. God's promises have not yet come to pass. They must lie low and continue to trust. God will intervene in God's time. We are reminded of God shutting the door of the ark in which Noah is to remain, waiting for the flood to pass (Genesis 7:16).

Verse 27:1 restates 26:20-21 in mythological terms. Primordial chaos, dramatised here by the mythical Leviathan is yet to be finally overcome. God's creative action continues. Israel, God's chosen instrument in revealing YHWH to the world, must learn to be faithful. The day will come when chaos is completely overcome.

The New Testament Book of Revelation draws on this imagery to describe the evil power of the Roman state attempting to destroy the young Christian community, just as Assyria and Babylon had attempted to annihilate Israel and Judah. The lesson is the same. We must continue to believe and learn to be faithful.

## YHWH's care for Judah (27:2-6)

The expression 'on that day' (verse 2) is used to introduce a comment on the text immediately preceding. This comment is by way of a stark contrast. YHWH will punish Israel's enemies, but is not angry with his vineyard, and will never cease caring for it (compare 5:1-7). He cannot allow 'thorns and briars' to grow, but Israel can always cling to him for protection. YHWH wants only peace (fullness of communion) with his chosen people.

## The Exile was to expiate and purify the people (27:7-11)

Here we have one more attempt to 'explain' the disaster of 587 and the exile. The thinking is consistent with a central conviction of the Deuteronomic School that idolatry is the chief sin that had to be punished and expiated (see Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:13). Isaiah shares this understanding (see Isaiah 2:6-22; 17:7-8).

Verses 10-11 return to another key theme of Isaiah: Jerusalem was destroyed because it failed to trust YHWH. As we were warned (6:9-10), Isaiah prophetic word was not heeded. This had to be punished. Isaiah's words, commented on and expanded, have been kept so that the same mistake will not recur.

**<sup>2</sup>On that day: A pleasant vineyard, sing about it! <sup>3</sup>I, YHWH, am its keeper; every moment I water it. I guard it night and day so that no one can harm it; <sup>4</sup>I have no wrath. If it gives me thorns and briars, I will march to battle against it. I will burn it up. <sup>5</sup>Or else let it cling to me for protection, let it make peace with me, let it make peace with me.**

**<sup>6</sup>In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit.**

**<sup>7</sup>Has he struck them down as he struck down those who struck them? Or have they been killed as their killers were killed? <sup>8</sup>By expulsion, by exile you struggled against them; with his fierce blast he removed them in the day of the east wind.**

**<sup>9</sup>Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be expiated, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin: when he makes all the stones of the altars like chalkstones crushed to pieces, no sacred poles or incense altars will remain standing.**

**<sup>10</sup>For the fortified city is solitary, a habitation deserted and forsaken, like the wilderness; the calves graze there, there they lie down, and strip its branches. <sup>11</sup>When its boughs are dry, they are broken; women come and make a fire of them. For this is a people without understanding; therefore he that made them will not have compassion on them, he that formed them will show them no favour.**

## Conclusion

**<sup>12</sup>On that day YHWH will thresh from the channel of the Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you will be gathered one by one, O people of Israel. <sup>13</sup>And on that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship YHWH on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.**

## Conclusion to Isaiah 13-27 (27:12-13)

The section on judgment (13-27) is rounded off with two concluding comments that promise the gathering back of those dispersed from the land. The last sound we hear is that of the ram's horn, summoning us, not to battle, but to solemn assembly, to prayer and to 'worship on the holy mountain at Jerusalem'.