

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah
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Isaiah 24-27 – The Redemptive Judgment of God

In teaching and preaching through the book of Isaiah, it's difficult to decide which chapters to include and which to leave out. I want to give a fair representation of the book, but I don't want to cover every chapter (I'm constrained by a semester structure, otherwise every chapter would be great). There is a section in the book that goes from chapters 13-27, and these four chapters constitute the climax of this second section. In these four chapters we have devastation, judgment, feasting and a lot of singing. "The theme is the triumph of God, which is good news (hence the singing) because it means that the reign of sin and death is at an end; the kingdom of God has come into its fullness."² Chapter 27 is what some would call the Isaiah Apocalypse or unveiling and it anticipates the better-known apocalypse in Revelation, which serves as the grand finale of the Bible as a whole.³

These chapters do all of that, and they also lay out neatly before us in a coherent message, if we'll take the time to look at them.

Isaiah 24 – The earth laid waste – Judgment

24:5 The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.

6 Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.

10 The wasted city is broken down; every house is shut up so that none can enter. 11 There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has grown dark; the gladness of the earth is banished. 12 Desolation is left in the city; the gates are battered into ruins.

21 On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. 22 They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.

Some of you may say, and you certainly will hear, that God is love. We've looked at how God is called Holy, Holy, Holy in Isaiah 6. Not Love, Love, Love. Certainly, he does love, but our Valentine's Day sort of love isn't what he cares about. His love entails judgment and justice, and is real and true.

Without dillydallying around it, we see that God judges the world and does so for his glory. "The final goal of judgment, however, is the glory of God, the visible display of his character."⁴

The New Testament equivalent of this passage is Romans 1-3, which you should read and cross reference with this chapter in Isaiah. Isaiah uses the pictures of flood and drought, so we aren't to take any one image completely literally. They are pictures of destruction. We can think of the flood in Genesis 6-9. God's terrible judgment that also wiped out the whole world.

"The earth is polluted. Convenience to one's self is all that matters, and that attitude is of the essence of sin.... Hatred pollutes, as does dishonesty. Both of these, as surely as phosphates or too much sewage, create a setting in which human life cannot continue. This is so because there are spiritual laws which are just as ironclad as the physical ones. And like the physical laws, we do not break them, we only break ourselves upon them. Thus love, joy, patience, etc. are not desiderata, they are necessities if human life is to endure."⁵

The judgment is brought about by the breaking of the minimal standards of human behavior, those codes of conduct that are in place in all of mankind. This affects the whole world. All will face this judgment. There is an impossibility of escape for those destined for judgment, whether people or kings or heavenly beings. There is nowhere to run. Yes, the Lord promises that he will not destroy the righteous along with the wicked, but the focus on this chapter not hope but terror.

This is the bad news of the gospel. You are wicked, more wicked than you ever thought, and you will pay for your wrongdoings in the end. Do you see this? Do you think God will spare you? Could you imagine if someone made a movie of Genesis 6-9 – the carnage, the grossness, would be unbelievable. And God is the one who carries it out.

In my favorite novel, *Lonesome Dove*, Texas Rangers Gus and Call find their old buddy Jake Spoon in the company of horse thieves. These men had stolen, killed, burned, shot and hanged innocent men for their own gain. But, as they told Jake, if you

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Ortland, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Webb, 105

³ Webb, 105

⁴ Webb, 107

⁵ Oswalt, 446

ride with horse thieves, you die with them too. Gus told Jake he was sorry he had, at some point, crossed the line along the way. “I didn’t see no line,” Jake said, pleading for his life.

They strung him up, and hanged the others first. As Jake sits on his horse, about to die, his friends choke up, and try to honor him as best they can. But they don’t let him go. His friends, crying as they do it, hang Jake.

God will cry when he judges the world, when he judges those not found in him. Don’t tell him you didn’t see the line. It’s there.

Isaiah 25 – The great banquet – Blessing

25:1 O Lord, 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.

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. 7 And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

The good news is that the bad news isn’t the end of the story. There is redemption and restoration for God’s people. This is best summed up by 25:1, “*O Lord, 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.*”

The triumph of God is celebrated with feasting and song, with personal songs and communal songs. “In place of the raucous drinking songs whose purpose was forgetfulness and the loosening of inhibitions with the result that the worst side of humanity was revealed, this is a song of heightened awareness and true freedom in commitment. The singer says, ‘I want a being like you for my God. I want to belong to one as powerful and faithful as you.’ But he also says, ‘You have shown me that you do truly belong to me, because you have not abandoned me to the oppressor, you have kept faith with me when I was so afraid you had forgotten me. You are my God.’”⁶

The song speaks of God having done wondrous things – “The biblical faith is rooted in the concept of a God who is not captive to the normal. He is able to do remarkable things, and does, in order to save his people.”⁷ This is different from modern religion, which has stripped God of his miraculous powers and had deified the physico-psycho-social system. It’s just not very wonderful to think of Jesus raising from the dead spiritually in our hearts. So what?

Isaiah is impressed by the power of God’s deeds, but even more by their purposefulness and moral character.⁸ God’s amazing acts are part of a divine plan. God delivers the victims of power, the poor and needy. And he sets before them a wonderful banquet. The food is the finest fare, and the food is free.

It makes me think of a wedding feast, and you’re a guest. I’ve been to some really fun weddings, and cannot imagine them without food. You can have a great wedding celebration for a low cost, but you still need to have food. The big blow out weddings are really fun – catered meal, full bar, dancing, friends and family. This is a taste of heaven.

There is a particular and a universal nature to this feast. It’s inclusive because all nations and all people will partake, but it is provided at only one place, so it is also exclusive. Nations have to come there if they want to partake. They can’t call in and pick it up to eat at home.

Isaiah reminds us at the end of chapter 25 that there was bad news. Had you forgotten?

What is the big difference between this party in chapter 25 and the scene we witnessed in chapter 24? God’s people are the ones present in 25; they are the ones who call on God, who show their dependence on him despite what the world around them says. Isaiah hammers the peoples’ pride and false security. “Isaiah is speaking of the city of 24:10, the world structured without reference to God. The citizens of this world city are one people though comprised of many nations, for they are one in ideology: the ‘I can cope’ syndrome that marks a fallen race, coupled with the ‘Who needs God?’ of the self-sufficient.”⁹

But a part of this gospel truth of salvation involves judgment – don’t forget that. We have too stark pictures at the end of this to remind us – a dung heap and a swimmer. “Either repentance will bring you to the feat or pride will keep you away, and the consequences will be unsullied joy or unspeakable judgment.”¹⁰ Pride and security are brought down.

Next Tuesday there will be celebrations. Why? Because it’s Fat Tuesday – the day before Lent begins. Lent is a time of self-control, of sacrifice, of denial. So the day before that happens is the time to let it all hang out, to let loose, to go crazy.

I wonder what it will be like this year in New Orleans, the site of the largest and most notorious Mardi Gras celebrations. Walking the streets of a city not yet recovered from flood and famine, they say they will still have Mardi Gras. In a city struggling to survive, they will celebrate excess. In a city without food, water and shelter, they will dance and frolic and play.

There is something forced and pathetic about this. Now isn’t the time. But there is also something hopeful nonetheless. People need to celebrate, however fake and forced it may be.

⁶ Oswalt, 460

⁷ Oswalt, 460

⁸ Webb, 108

⁹ Motyer, 170

¹⁰ Webb, 109-110

Someday there will be a real celebration in the real city for the people of God – and it will be for forever and it will be very good. For Lent will not come the next day, and you won't have to worry about hangovers and regret. If you are there, you will be glad and rejoice, for God will have been very good to you. It will be sad for you if you don't like a good Shiraz, or port or a tall, dark glass of Guinness. You should prepare now for a juicy steak, or seafood platter or perfectly prepared sushi.

Isaiah 26 – The great city – Restoration

26:1 In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: “We have a strong city; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. 2 Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. 3 You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. 4 Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. 5 For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust.

Isaiah's eschatological cantata continues in chapter 26, as he discusses the new city created by God for his people. There will be a strong city with salvation as walls and bulwarks. How do you get into this city? You will be right with God and you will keep in perfect peace.

This is the opposite of James' double minded-man (1:6-8) or Jesus' servant with two masters (Matt 6:24). It is trusting in God. “Faith is not a flash in the pan, but a lifelong commitment, and it is well-founded approach to life, not because of what it is (for it may be weak and wobbly) but because of the one in whom it reposes.”¹¹

Isaiah says that if you stay on God, if you trust in him, you will keep him in perfect peace. There is no words “perfect peace.” What this is in Hebrew is “peace, peace.” Shalom, shalom. We've seen how the doubling of a word emphasizes and strengthens it. That is why it's so astounding to see the treble Holy, Holy, Holy. Here we have Peace, Peace. All is made right. Not only the absence of wrong, but the completeness of rightness. That is the kind of peace there is – and God is faithful. *He* trusts in you. That is why we should trust in him forever. Because he is an everlasting rock.

Do you have that sort of faith? Can you trust in him like that? Trust is the question. In some ways, it's like marriage. There are no guarantees in marriage. You really are putting yourself, your life, your trust in another person. This is why it's so important to be able to trust him or her. You need to be able to see a life worth trusting. God shows us his – he is faithful, an everlasting rock. You should marry him.

But it would be foolish to marry other gods, for instance, to trust in the city of man, the lofty city. It is worth waiting for God to perform his wonders. “No matter how perplexing or painful the present might be, Isaiah was confident that the whole of human history was converging on a single point which had been determined by God in advance. And then God's people would have much to celebrate.”¹² You need to hold out and wait for the right one to give yourself to.

The lofty city sure looks good. It is high, shiny, sophisticated, modern, technological, important, and gives many exciting promises. We are tempted by it. We live there much of the time. But it is better to be among the poor and the lowly who will triumph than to be among the mighty who will be triumphed over.”¹³ It makes me think of the reality show where the women were brought in and shown a man who they thought was wealthy and prominent, when in the end he was unemployed and living at home. They were duped. It was a lie. They were fooled and fools to believe. They wanted to believe something else than what really was true and accurate.

The lofty city is the human city which God will destroy. The strong city, the new Zion is the city of God of the future that will rise above the ruins. “But between these two futures lies the settled disposition of patient, trustful waiting to which the people of God must return again and again. It is to be the hallmark as they live out their lives in the world as it is.”¹⁴

You may say, “I don't feel like I can see the City of God in my life. I may believe you, I may believe Isaiah, but what I see around me doesn't line up with what you're saying about the future.” Or you might put it this way: “There is a tension between the promise of ‘then’ and the pain of ‘now.’”¹⁵

What do we do in while we wait for this city? “The righteous, who accept the ordering of life as from the hand of the Lord, commit themselves to it in a spirit of obedience.... So they wait for him, in patient faith, until he strikes his enemies to the ground. They do not seek altered circumstances, but within their God-appointed pathway, they desire and yearn for him.”¹⁶

We'll come back to this.

Isaiah 27 – The great vineyard of Israel – Bounty in Worship

27:1 In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. 2 In that day, “A pleasant vineyard, sing of it! 3 I, the Lord, am its keeper; every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day; 4 I have no wrath.

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

¹¹ Motyer, 174

¹² Webb, 110

¹³ Oswalt, 473

¹⁴ Webb, 110

¹⁵ Webb, 110

¹⁶ Motyer, 175

12 In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the Lord will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. 13 And in 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 the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem.

God will do all this – he will judge the wicked, set right the righteous and give them tremendous blessing. That is our hope, and he is our help. God’s wrath will be directed towards his enemies. The sum of evil is represented by Leviathan, the monster/dragon of the sea. It will be vanquished. “Isaiah’s contemporaries could not put the world to rights any more than their ancestors could, nor were they expected to do so. All the Lord required was trustful waiting. To them the wait seemed long; to him it was only a little while. So too for us.”¹⁷

God has a plan which embraces all nations, and Israel is destined to play a central role in that plan. But before it can fulfill its calling it must be cleansed. He says he not only will cleanse it, but he will nourish it and make it flourish. He speaks of this as the land being a new vineyard. The judgment in chapter five will be totally reversed and everything will be set right.

In fact, God almost looks jealous about it here. “At the end of the song the Lord speaks like a lover whose love for his beloved is so intense that he almost wishes someone would attack her so he might have the satisfaction of defending her.”¹⁸

And where does it all end up? In worship. “All the strands of the second major segment of the book, then, converge on this single point: worship – God being acknowledged for who he is. Such worship is not an escape from reality but a return to it, and it is in returning to reality that the world, so long out of joint, will finally be made whole.”¹⁹

It’s exciting to get wrapped up into Leviathans, whatever those are, but really our thoughts should be captured by worshipping God. We get a taste of that now on the Lord’s Day, a time when we are able to rest and worship with each other. Won’t it be amazing to be able to do that with God himself present among us in fullness? That is the picture before us.

I have a lot of wrapping together and wrapping up to do. Isaiah 24-27 – so what?

So what? Always a good question.

So- can you say, “You are my God”? “For ultimately the one requirement for inclusion among the people of God is the acknowledgement that salvation is to be found nowhere else than in the God of Israel.”²⁰ Do you believe that? Do you trust in God? More importantly, do you think he trusts in you as per 26:3? Will we be feasting together at this banquet in this city with this wine from the vineyard with these songs? Will you be there?

If you don’t think so, or if you’re not sure, then I ask you to call out to God tonight. He is the sure foundation, the rock who will never be moved. He has been and is working wonders, and he can do so in your own life. Trust in him alone for your hope and security. Be gone with your pride and self-sufficiency, for they will only lead you to destruction. Give over to God.

If you will be feasting in the new city, then I want to show you something else. Believers in Jesus Christ are *already* citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem – Hebr. 12:22 tells us this. That if we are in Christ, we are in the heavenly city, in Zion, in Jerusalem. We are secure there.

You might also recall that in Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says this: “*You are a city on the hill.*” This is the passage where he tells Christians that they are salt and light. But he says we are a city on the hill. What does that mean? Is that a metaphor he plucked out of the air?

No, I don’t think so. He was thinking of these images, the ones of the new city. We are members of the heavenly city, Jerusalem, Zion, the City of God. And yet, and yet, and yet, we still live in lofty cities, the City of Man. We are members of both at the same time – This is the already/not yet tension that we feel and struggle with.

What are the implications of this already/not yet dual citizenship?

One is that we don’t run away and form separate communities. We have to be very careful that we don’t assume that being a city on a hill means that we need to move into the country somewhere and create RUFville and attend RUF University and think that if we all just lived and behaved rightly that people would flock into our cities and the world would be changed.

No, no, no. We must live in these lofty cities and seek transformed lives among them. There is a crazy, unknown verse in Jeremiah 29. Verse 7 says, “*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*”

Pastor Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan has seized on this verse and incorporated it into its mission statement. The vision of Redeemer is:

To spread the gospel, first through ourselves and then through the city by word, deed, and community; To bring about personal changes, social healing, and cultural renewal through a movement of churches and ministries that change New York City and through it, the world.

Notice that there is a love and appreciation of New York City in this vision. A transformation is in view, but it is from the inside. What would that mean for the University of Oklahoma, for Norman?

The Jeremiah verse says that we shouldn’t seek for the destruction of the university or town, but the renewal of it. The welfare of the city, for when it prospers and blossoms, then we do as well.

¹⁷ Webb, 112

¹⁸ Webb, 113

¹⁹ Webb, 115

²⁰ Webb, 115

Another verse that speaks of this is Proverbs 11:10: “*When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness.*”

Does the city, the university rejoice when the righteous do well? I’m not sure, but it certainly cannot if we aren’t here. We need to be involved in the university, in its politics, in its daily life, in its social well-being. OU Senior Norman Maynard is a columnist for the OUDaily this semester because he wanted to be involved in the university, to have a voice in print. Today they printed an article in which he called students to seek dependence instead of independence, to cry out for help. It was excellent.

Are you involved in the campus, in the city?

Most of you go to college or move to a city on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis. You figure it will be better and profitable for you in the long run to graduate with a degree or two. Or move to a cool city. In that sense, you are using OU or your city for your own gain. And of course, that is fine to some extent.

But don’t you think God has you here for other reasons than that? Don’t you think that it is amazing that he would bring thousands of people from all across the state, the region, the nation, and put them in tight quarters for a time? Don’t you wonder what it is that he might have for you if you would begin asking what he wants you to do about it?

Ricky Jones, church planter of Redeemer Tulsa came to OURUF and Relish two weeks ago and said something that I’ve been thinking about. He mentioned how most people are only in school for themselves, and are so self-focused that they never notice anything else around them. Like unbelievers. Like needs. For example, he said, you know those really, really boring classes you have? If you are a Christian and you’re in a boring, mind-numbing class, you have to consider that God has you in the class for another reason besides learning. And you have to figure out what that is. That makes the whole class more exciting, as you wait to find out why you’re really there each day. Ricky shared that he met his wife Bianca in a class like that.

What are you here for today? Is it only for yourself?

If you are a Christian, God has called you to give your life away, like Jesus did. To sacrifice, to serve, to minister to needs, to consider others as more important than yourself.

I honestly don’t know what that means for you. I think there are some very creative and important things that could be done from those here tonight if you’ll start to look around and ask God what you should do. Some of you, now that you’re junior and seniors, should try to move back into the dorms. Some of you, now that you’re juniors and seniors, should join a fraternity or sorority. Some of you should reach out to the handicapped, or the foreign students, or volunteer to tutor kids in reading, or see what needs to be done at the women’s shelter. Have people into your homes.

People should begin to say, Wow, I can’t imagine OU without RUF. I can’t imagine OU with Christians. I’m sure glad they’re here.

If we really did this, if we really believed Isaiah 24-27, then we’d start to see some of the already aspects of this new city taking place around us. And it is, I assure you. Let’s take this vision and make it ours. ***To spread the gospel, first through ourselves and then through the city by word, deed, and community; To bring about personal changes, social healing, and cultural renewal through a movement of churches and ministries that change The University of Oklahoma and through it, the world.***

How is this possible?

I skipped over 25:8: “*He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.*”

God will swallow up death forever. Wow. Tears will be wiped away, a tremendous intimate picture of a mother loving her children. God will do this. No more sorrow and sadness. No more death. No more anti-shalom. Everything will be set right.

Won’t that be awesome? Jesus did that. Jesus chose to die – the only who did. Others have chosen when they would die or the manner in which they would die, but only Jesus chose to die when he didn’t have to. He could still be living, you know. But he chose to die for others, that’s how much they love him. And yet he rose again from the grave, proving his power over death.

The 2006 Winter Olympics are in their last week. Names like Bode Miller and other names.... shall fade from memory. The fact I cannot think of any proves my point. But what is one thing we think of from Turin, Italy? The Shroud of Turin. No one knows whether this is the real shroud that Jesus wore or not. Some swear it is, others says this is preposterous. Most likely, it isn’t, but that doesn’t keep us from wondering. And Jesus’ possible shroud is world-renowned. Amazing.

What we see in Isaiah 25 and in the resurrection of Jesus is a victory party. A victory over what? – Death.

This is our great hope. Without it, without the resurrection of Christ, our hope is shallow. Our desire for justice is weak. Our insistence on respect for women is hard to follow through on. If the world is going to be burned up by the sun someday, and if there is no life after death, and if everything is merely a sophisticated form of evolution, then really – what is the point?

But if Jesus really did rise from the grave – if that really happened – then all of sudden things are different. You have a reason to hope, to share the gospel, to believe, to do good, to love mercy and justice and goodness.

May we drink the wine and eat the best ***together*** in our victory party over death in the city of God, worshipping our Savior, Mighty to Save, Jesus Christ.

May we seek to change the university, the city, the state, the nation, the world.