

"The Gospel according to Isaiah: A New Earth

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The day after Christmas, my son Caleb and I saw the latest Star Wars movie, *The Rise of Skywalker*, the ninth movie in the series. So, for the next 45 minutes, I thought I would tell you the plot of the movie. I hope you don't mind if I spoil the ending for you.

I'm kidding, of course. Well, we did see the movie. We wanted to see how that long saga of the Skywalker family ended. Would all the various threads of that long and convoluted plot be tied up neatly? Would all our questions be answered? Would the story have a satisfying ending?

Well, the movie had a fairly satisfying ending, even if all the questions raised in the previous movies weren't answered. It's good to have a satisfying ending. There's something in us that hungers for a resolution. I think that's why we like these epic stories, whether it's the Star Wars movies or the *Lord of the Rings* novels and movies, or any of the other superhero movies or action movies. We want to see good triumph over evil. We want to see the tension of the conflict between good and evil resolve into harmony. We all deeply desire a good ending, because from our perspective, much of real life doesn't end that way.

We often see that things don't resolve neatly in our lives. Things are left undone. We don't achieve all our dreams. Forces of evil are not always defeated. Sometimes, seemingly good people die young and apparently evil people live long lives. But whether good or evil seems to have an advantage in this life, everything is swallowed up in death. We long for a better ending than the grave. We want life to continue forever, but not the way it is right now. We want a better life, a better world, a world without evil and conflict, a world without decay, a world without shattered dreams and disappointments, without failures and sorrows.

Can it be possible that such an ending exists to our story, and to the story of the whole universe? Or is that too much to hope for?

The good news is that there is a very good end to the story of the universe. God has told us the general outlines of what will happen at the end of time as we know it. This is in the future. It's not something that we've experienced. In fact, it won't be quite like anything we've ever experienced. And for that reason, the only way we could know how the story ends is if God has revealed it to us. And he has.

Today, we're going to consider the end of the story of God and the universe that he has made. Four weeks ago, we began to look at this story by reading passages from the book of Isaiah, a messenger that God sent to his people over 2,700 years ago. The story begins with God, who is excellent in every way. In fact, he is perfect in every way. And there is simply no one like him. He is the Creator of all things, and he made us to know him, to love him, and to worship him.

Like all good stories, this story has conflict. God made us and prepared a garden for us. Metaphorically speaking, he planted us in that garden and expected us to produce good fruit. But we produced rotten fruit. More literally, God made human beings for a purpose, to serve him and know him and love him and obey him, and we don't do that. Instead of centering our lives on the one true God, we ignore him, we think we know better than him, we don't trust him, and instead we put our hope in false gods, idols.

God would be just in removing us all from his creation. He could have destroyed human beings and condemned us all to hell. But he didn't do that. He is patient, and he put up with rebellious people. He did send partial judgments against those rebels. Those temporal judgments include death and things like natural disasters and foreign armies defeating nations.

But God also promised he would send a special person to fix all that is broken. A son would be born, from the line of King David, the greatest king of Israel. Though a human being, he would also be Mighty God. This same child, born of a virgin, would also be God's ultimate servant, who is a light to the nations, calling people back to God. In fact, he would live the life that they should have lived, and he would suffer the penalty for their rebellion. Their sins would be placed on his shoulders, and he would be crushed for their iniquities. His wounds would heal them. And he would live to see his people be made righteous. He would intercede for his people.

We know that Jesus has fulfilled these promises. He is the Son of God who also became a human being, born of the virgin Mary. He lived the perfect life that we should live, always loving God the Father, always worshiping him and obeying him, always loving other people perfectly. And he died in place of his people, bearing the penalty for their sin. He rose from the grave, living to make intercession for those who come to him in faith, who have their sins removed and who have his righteousness credited to him.

We now live in this period of time in the story, the time when Jesus has already come, has lived, has died, and has risen from the grave and ascended into heaven, the time when people

are coming to him in faith. But we're not yet at the end of the story. It's wonderful that people can find forgiveness in Jesus, that people can be reconciled to God through him. But we all know that the world is still broken. We still feel that things aren't right. Even Christians don't feel right. We feel conflicted. We still struggle with sin. We struggle with depression and loneliness and broken relationships. We still see conflict in the world. People act in evil ways. There are wars. There is death. We long to live in a better world.

The book of Isaiah promises that such a world is coming. What will this world look like? What will happen when the world becomes the way that it should be?

We'll find out the answers to these questions this morning.

The book of Isaiah doesn't give us all the details we want, and it doesn't give us all the information that the rest of the Bible does. So, I'll fill in a few gaps for us, but mostly we'll look at what this book of the Bible says.

We know from the rest of the Bible that this world will end when Jesus comes back to Earth. Before that time, God is in the process of gathering people from all nations to himself through his Son Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We see this in part in Isaiah 60:1-7:

- ¹ Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
- ² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
- ³ And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
- ⁴ Lift up your eyes all around, and see;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from afar,
and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.
- ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and exult,
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
- ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.
- ⁷ All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you;
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;

they shall come up with acceptance on my altar,
and I will beautify my beautiful house.¹

People who lived in darkness will see God's light shine in Jesus. People from all nations will come to the light of the world, Jesus (John 8:12). This prophecy began to be fulfilled even when Jesus was an infant, when the magi came from the east to visit him in Bethlehem. These were people from the nations, Gentiles, non-Jews. They came to Jesus to worship him. They brought their wealth to Jesus. They gave him gold and frankincense (Matt. 2:11).

Though this prophecy had begun to be fulfilled over two thousand years ago, there are still elements of it that have not been fulfilled. Later in Isaiah 60, God says this, beginning in verse 18:

18 Violence shall no more be heard in your land,
devastation or destruction within your borders;
you shall call your walls Salvation,
and your gates Praise.

19 The sun shall be no more
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give you light;
but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.

20 Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended.

21 Your people shall all be righteous;
they shall possess the land forever,
the branch of my planting, the work of my hands,
that I might be glorified.

22 The least one shall become a clan,
and the smallest one a mighty nation;
I am the LORD;
in its time I will hasten it (Isa. 60:18–22).

It doesn't matter what land you live in, there is still violence there. But God promises us that there will be a day when his people will live in security. In fact, God promises that he himself will be the light of his people. There will be no more darkness. That is probably

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

metaphorical or symbolic. Darkness represents evil, confusion, isolation, ignorance. There will be none of those things in the world that God will make for his people.

There are other passages in Isaiah that speak of the nations coming to worship God and of there being an end to war. Turn to Isaiah 2:1–5:

¹ The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
³ and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord.

In the Bible, Jerusalem is often pictured as the city of God, the place of his people. In this image, Jerusalem will be on the highest of mountains. This doesn't literally mean that Mount Zion will rise in elevation. In biblical imagery, the highest mountain is the most important place. What this means is that the city of God will be the greatest, people from all nations will flow into this city to be taught by God. And weapons of war will be demolished, because there will be no more war.

There are passages in Isaiah that speak of how everything in this Jerusalem will be holy, cleansed of all filth, of all sin (Isa. 4:4). The city of God will be populated by “everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem” (Isa. 4:3). But lest we think this Jerusalem is the same as the city on Earth right now that bears that name, we need to read other passages.

Let's look toward the end of the book. Turn to Isaiah 65:17–25:

- 17 “For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
- 18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,
and her people to be a gladness.
- 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping
and the cry of distress.
- 20 No more shall there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not fill out his days,
for the young man shall die a hundred years old,
and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.
- 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
- 22 They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
- 23 They shall not labor in vain
or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD,
and their descendants with them.
- 24 Before they call I will answer;
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
- 25 The wolf and the lamb shall graze together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
and dust shall be the serpent's food.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain,”
says the LORD. “

The beginning of the Bible says that “God created the heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1). That phrase, “heavens and earth,” refers to everything in the universe. Here, we’re told that God will create a new universe. Whether that means that this world will be destroyed and replaced by a new one, or whether this world will be refined, with all the evil purged of it, which is more likely, doesn’t really matter for our purposes. The important thing to see is that a new world is coming. And we also see that Jerusalem is synonymous with this new world. In other words, the

whole world will become the city of God, which is what we're told at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21. And in this city of God, there will be no more weeping or distress. We're told that people won't die young. In fact, if someone were to die at the age of one hundred, they would be considered young. And even if a sinner, someone not forgiven of their sin, were to be in this city and die at the age of one hundred, he would still be accursed. As we'll see, there won't be any death in this city, nor will there be any wicked people, so I assume that the language here is evocative. It's like saying, "Imagine a world where no one dies young, and where the evil person, regardless of how long he lives in this life, will not escape punishment."

There will be peace in this new creation. God's people will live, work, and eat. They will never be removed. While wolves and lambs will live peacefully, the serpent, representing Satan, will eat dust, which I think is a symbolic way of saying he will be defeated. No one will hurt or destroy in God's holy mountain, his holy city, his new creation. That's exactly what we read earlier in Isaiah, when we looked at a passage concerning an offspring of David who would have the Holy Spirit upon him. In Isaiah 11, we're told that this leader would bring about justice, righteousness, and he would destroy the wicked. Then, the wolf would lay down with the lamb (Isa. 11:1–6). And we're told:

- 9 They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

This idea of God's "mountain" connects a number of passages in Isaiah that talk of the new creation. The one that is my favorite is this one, found in Isaiah 25:6–9:

- 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."

On this “mountain,” in God’s new creation, there will be a giant feast for all peoples. This doesn’t mean that every single person will be there, because it will become clear that not everyone will be at this party. But there will be people from all nations, from every people group on Earth. And they will have the best of food and drink.

But far better than food or drink is what is promised in verses 7 and 8. There is a veil that covers the whole world, that darkens our experience. And that veil is death. Yet we’re told that God will swallow up death forever. Death seems to swallow up everything right now, but death itself will die. It will be destroyed. Death comes because of sin. But on the day when God recreates the world, there will be no more sin in his creation. There will be no more death. God will comfort his people and remove all tears and sadness. On that great day of salvation, God’s people will say, “Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him. Now he’s here. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

We can’t imagine a world without death. Everything seems to die in our experience. And not just people. Relationships die. Friendships die. Dreams die. Our hopes and joys die. Memories can fade and be lost. All the accomplishments of all people seem to die. Yet we’re told that death does not have the final word.

Before I say more about that, I want us to notice the next few verses in Isaiah 25. Look at verses 10–12:

- ¹⁰ For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain,
and Moab shall be trampled down in his place,
as straw is trampled down in a dunghill.
- ¹¹ And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it
as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim,
but the LORD will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands.
- ¹² And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down,
lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.

We might be tempted to think that everyone will be at this feast in God’s new creation. But throughout Isaiah, there is discussion of judgment. God will rescue his people. But his enemies will be crushed. Moab was an enemy of Israel, and God said that Moab would be trampled. His place would be turned into dung, and Moab would try to swim out of that muck, to no avail. Only those who turn to God in faith, who turn away from their sins and their attempts to save themselves, will be brought into the party in the new Jerusalem, the new creation.

We get a sense of that in the next few verses, in Isaiah 26:1–6:

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.
- ⁶ The foot tramples it,
the feet of the poor,
the steps of the needy.”

The gates of the city of God will be opened to the righteous. And who is righteous? Those whose minds are stayed on God, those who trust in God. That’s what faith is. It is looking to God and trusting him. It is believing that what he says is true and good. It is accepting his provision. God will humble the proud. The feet of the poor and needy will step on their enemies, at least metaphorically speaking. A great reversal is coming. Those who are weak in the world’s eyes but who trust in God will be great in God’s city. Those who are great in the world’s eyes but who do not trust God will be laid low.

This judgment will follow something amazing. Look at verse 19:

- ¹⁹ Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.
You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of light,
and the earth will give birth to the dead.

Though death swallows everything up, its effects will be reversed. All the dead will live. They will be raised from the dust. When Jesus returns, the dead will come alive again, in bodies that cannot be destroyed. But only those who trust in Jesus will live forever with God in this perfect new creation. They will live in paradise, a “pleasant vineyard” that has no thorns and no punishment from God (Isa. 27:2–4). They will fill the world with good fruit (Isa. 27:6), just as “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).

In Isaiah 33:17, we're told that those who trust in God will "behold the king in his beauty." They will experience healing. Isaiah 35:5–6a says,

- ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

But only those who have been cleansed of their sin by God shall be there. Only those who have been redeemed, bought back from the kingdom of darkness, shall dwell with God. So, Isaiah 35:8–10 says,

- ⁸ And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;
the unclean shall not pass over it.
It shall belong to those who walk on the way;
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.
⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Throughout Isaiah, we see that salvation and judgment go hand in hand. Some people are spared God's righteous wrath, his punishment of sin. Others are condemned because they refuse to trust in God. That's how the book of Isaiah ends. Look at Isaiah 66:15–24:

- ¹⁵ "For behold, the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like the whirlwind,
to render his anger in fury,
and his rebuke with flames of fire.
¹⁶ For by fire will the LORD enter into judgment,
and by his sword, with all flesh;
and those slain by the LORD shall be many.

¹⁷ "Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the LORD.

¹⁸ "For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, ¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to

Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. ²⁰ And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD.

²² “For as the new heavens and the new earth
that I make
shall remain before me, says the LORD,
so shall your offspring and your name remain.

²³ From new moon to new moon,
and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
declares the LORD.

²⁴ “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

God himself, in the person of Jesus, will come to judge everyone who has ever lived. Those who rebelled against God will be destroyed. They will experience eternal death. This passage says that such people did idolatrous and sinful practices. But many people from different nations will come to God. They will become ministers to God. They will come to worship him.

I realize that some people will think that the idea of God condemning people is somehow unfair, or unloving. But think about this: Imagine what your version of a perfect world is. Imagine what the world is like. Imagine what you would be doing in that world. Think about who would be there. Now, ask yourself, is God at the center of that world? If the answer is no, then you don't really want God. And if you don't want to be in a God-centered world, why should God let you into such a world? He allows those who don't want him to go their own way. But going away from God means, in the end, going away from the source of love, light, beauty, truth, and life. It means existing in a world without God and without all of those things.

Salvation and judgment go hand in hand. We see this most clearly in the death of Jesus, which we talked about last Sunday. Jesus' death was an act of salvation for those who trust in him. He took the judgment that they deserved, dying in their place and experiencing hell on Earth when he took on God's wrath against their sin. On the third day, Jesus rose from the grave. His resurrection is proof that God will resurrect the whole world. Jesus' body died and was

recreated. It is the first installment of a new creation that will come in the future, when Jesus comes again.

When Jesus comes again, everyone will know it. Everyone will see him. In fact, every knee will bow before him (Isa. 45:23; Phil. 2:9–11). But that doesn't mean everyone will trust him, worship him, and be reconciled to God. Jesus will judge everyone who has lived. Those who trust him for their standing with God, for their ultimate comfort and security, will live in peace and harmony in the new creation. Those who reject Jesus will be cast out forever.

If you have not yet put your trust in Jesus, I urge you to do that now. He is the only way to be made right with God. He is the only way into the new creation. There is much more I could say about Jesus if you don't know him yet. If you want to know more about him, I would love to talk to you about him. I plead with you now to seek him while there is still time.

For those who do know Jesus, this message should bring us great comfort. Death does not have the last word. There is a better world coming, a world we can hardly imagine. And with that world, there will be great joy and peace. We will see the King in his beauty, and that sight will satisfy our deepest longings.

Last Monday, I visited Alice Withee in the nursing home. She was on hospice, on morphine. She would die the very next day. While there, I sang some hymns to her. I sang "It Came upon the Midnight Clear," a Christmas carol, because it has these words in it:

All ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow;
Look now, for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
Oh rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing.

For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophets seen of old,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.

If you're feeling crushed beneath life's load, toiling with painful steps, hang on. The age of gold, promised by God through his prophets, is coming. Peace will come upon the whole Earth. There will be no more sorrow or pain, no aching in our soul. All the tension of this life will resolve. All conflict will be over. The greatest story ever told will have the greatest ending imaginable. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, this life will be for us only the cover and the title page. In the new creation, we will begin "Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."²

² C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1994), 228).