

# A Tale Of Two Cities

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[ 0 : 00 ] For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin. The foreigner's palace is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.

And the contrast that we have in the first verse of the next chapter, 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.

And so on through to the end of verse 4, they are describing that city of God. It's really, in many ways, a tale of two cities we could entitle or study this evening.

And in Charles Dickens, the tale of two cities, that great work of Dickens that goes by that name, the opening lines of that work of literature read as follows.

It's a literature set in the time of the French Revolution and comparing the city of London with the city of Paris and its upheaval and its rebellion and all that's going on during the uprising and the terrible things that took place during the French Revolution.

[ 1 : 13 ] And comparing that as far as Dickens is concerned with the relative peace of London. This is what he says in the opening words of A Tale of Two Cities.

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom. It was the age of foolishness. It was the epoch of belief.

It was the epoch of incredulity. It was the season of light. It was the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope. It was the winter of despair.

We had everything before us. We had nothing before us. We were all going direct to heaven. We were all going direct the other way.

Tale of Two Cities in contrast. And you could easily apply these opening words of Dickens' Tale of Two Cities to these two cities that are compared in this prophecy of Isaiah.

[ 2 : 13 ] A city that is at enmity with God as represented in the city in chapter 25 and verse 2 and other references in the previous chapter as we'll see. And also in scripture too.

And very often you'll find the scripture comparing and contrasting the city of God, the city of chapter 26 there that has salvation for its walls and bulwarks, where God has built this secure city in a spiritual way of course, and contrasting that with a city that people build in rebellion against him, in ungodliness, in a deliberate alternative to God, as you'll find in various places also throughout the scripture.

But that's what you have in these two great chapters of Isaiah. And as you look at these two cities in contrast, this tale of two cities, you could say that that really applies in many ways to our own society right now in our present day here in our own nation.

Because there are two cities in existence in our nation too. There's the city that is going on being built by rebellion against God, by an overthrow of God's word, of God's commandments, of the cause of Christ, of salvation, of all those things that are very much part of the gospel that we know of.

And in rebelling against that and in overthrowing that, people are trying to build security and continuance and happiness and contentment as an alternative to that by their own devices.

[ 3 : 52 ] And along with that, in contrast, you have the city of God, the city that God is still building, where he's bringing people to know himself, where these characteristics of righteousness and peace and trust and faith and salvation are very much God's own city that he is building and has been building in many ways since the beginning of time.

So that's really our study this evening. But that's why you find so often in literature, it's not just Dickens. You'll find the same, of course, in John Bunyan's famous work, The Pilgrim's Progress, which borrows, as Dickens did, many images from the Bible itself that set out the contrast between that which is at enmity with God and that which is friendly with God or has come to embrace God

and God's ways and God's values.

And as we'll see this evening, that runs right through the scripture as well. So as Isaiah presented this, or God through him was presenting this truth to the people of Isaiah's day, there was, of course, an anticipation in this of a day coming when the Assyrians would come and when the Babylonians would come and when even after that, through the Babylonian invasion, there would be an exile for 70 years in Babylon, followed by a return again to Jerusalem and a rebuilding work, preparing the way for the New Testament.

But the great thing about these Old Testament prophets, especially in the likes of Isaiah and Jeremiah, is that they take you beyond the Old Testament age and then to the New Testament age. And indeed, they take us up beyond the New Testament to the conclusion of the New Testament age, to the day of Christ, to the day of God, to the day of judgment. It's quite clear from Isaiah that you cannot simply confine his thoughts to what is happening in the course of time, that you have to actually go as far as God's judgment on the end of the world.

[ 5 : 54 ] And all that follows on from that judgment, even as he finishes this great prophecy, they shall, where he says, the new heavens and the new earth that God is going to set up and remain before him, so shall your offspring and your name remain, he says to his faithful people, but he says, they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me, for their warms shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and there shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

And of course we know that our Lord himself took these very words and described hell in these terms. Isaiah was very conscious of the lot, of God's enemies, of the wicked, if they didn't repent. And this is why he has the contrast between the lost and the saved, between the wicked and the righteous. And why he is throwing our minds here to that great contrast.

As we look at these two verses and see some of what's built around it, we'll see these two cities as they're placed side by side in contrast. First of all, the first city, you could see it represents the unstable city of human self-sufficiency.

I know that's a long way of describing it, but that's essentially what you've got. It's the unstable city of human self-sufficiency, because that's what it's all about, as he's describing, the city that God is going to come and judge and destroy, and what the inhabitants of that city are actually doing at the moment.

[ 7 : 25 ] This is him speaking figuratively, of course, although there were very literal enemies, the likes of Moab, against Israel at the time, and against Israel's God. But what he's saying, as we've said already, is he's making an image here for us of, in a spiritual way, how people come to build this city in rebellion and in open enmity against God.

And how that's human self-sufficiency, independence from God, as they're trying at least to establish it. that's what's busy in this city that God is going to come and actually destroy.

Well, in chapter 24 and verse 10, if you just turn back to that verse, the wasted city is broken down, every house is shut up so that none can enter, there is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine, all joy has grown dark, the gladness of the earth is banished.

We'll come back to look at more of the detail of that in a minute. But there you see, there's the shapeless city, because the words that are used there, very interestingly, where you find in verse 10, the wasted city is broken down.

It's a city that's wasted. It's a word used way back at the beginning of the Bible, in the very opening words of the Bible, where it describes that God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without form and void.

[ 8 : 55 ] It didn't have at that time shape to it, if you like, that God then brought about. In other words, you find that using the imagery of the Bible again, the clay, if you like, that God had brought into being, the earth that he had created, and the heavens that he had created, the clay, so to put it, the potter had not yet put it into his hands in order to bring it to the shape that he intended, as described in the following days of the creation.

It was without form, and it was void, it was empty. And what Isaiah is saying, using that same word, is that this city of human devising, and human self-sufficiency, and human building, and human wisdom, is in fact without real purpose, without anything of a purpose that will be lasting, without any lasting benefit, without anything that will in any way eventually benefit those who are building it, it will be the other way about for them.

It's the city of human life, a sinful city of self-serving, choosing to live without God, rejecting absolutes. Chapter 24, verse 5 again, the earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant, they are living without absolutes, they don't want these absolutes, they don't want God's commands, they don't want to be restricted by God's will, by the things that are to do with God's revelation of himself.

It's empty, it's individualistic, it's unstable, and that's exactly what is being described, and that's exactly what we're seeing around us today, and in fact it's been there right through from the beginning of time.

Those who've rebelled against God and continue to do so in every generation, it's an attempt to build something lasting for themselves, as an alternative to God's city.

[10:55] And of course it's very difficult, isn't it, to get through to people, and indeed only God can do that ultimately, but we have to actually try and present the gospel in a way that shows using the Bible's own imagery, the foolishness of building in this way without God, because you know yourselves that there are fault lines throughout the earth's crust, that there are fault lines that sometimes reveal themselves in great earthquakes, that as the great plates that the earth is formed of rub up against each other, and cause earthquakes and tsunamis and all sorts of things like that as a result, and terrify people and great loss of life.

Well, we can say that building in rebellion against God is actually building on a great fault line spiritually and morally.

And people are oblivious to that fact, and people will tell you, it doesn't feel like that, of course it doesn't feel like that. It doesn't feel like you're on a fault line when you're in Wellington in New Zealand, and you go to a hotel there for a few nights or for whatever, it is, and then they'll tell you at the desk, well actually this city is really pretty much on the fault line that runs through this country, and if you go down into the basement, we can show you the great, massive, great dampers on which this hotel is built.

Why is it built in the way it is with these great dampers? Because it's prone to earthquake, and they're trying to stop it toppling when the earthquake comes. And people are building, morally speaking and spiritually speaking, on what God says in his word is a fault line.

They're building in a way that will in fact be subject to his judgment ultimately, if they don't repent, if they don't turn from that way of sin.

[12:52] Remember back in the Old Testament, back in the days of Genesis, and in chapter 11, you have an account there of people in those days deciding that they would build a great city, that they would build a great city whose top reached up to heaven.

And it's obvious that they were doing it as an alternative to what God provided for them through his truth. And as you read that chapter in Genesis chapter 11, it's quite graphic the way it describes the building work, the decision, first of all, these people who settled in the land of Shinar, they said, come, let's make bricks and burn them thoroughly.

Let's make sure that they're actually turned out properly. They had brick for stone. And come, they said, let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. And let's make a name for ourselves, lest we'd be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.

There's the building project. There's the plan. There's the city. It doesn't have proper foundations, but it feels all right. Because we're building it. We're building it without God. We don't want God as part of it.

We don't want his laws. We don't want his restrictions. It's something we're pleased to build ourselves. And it feels right to us. And you know, as time goes on, they would have said, look at how it's building up.

[14:08] Look at the layers that we're building. One on top of the other. And the higher we go, the more secure it becomes. In our own estimation, because nothing's happened so far, so the people who say these things in the Bible are true, they're just talking rubbish.

And then something happened. Something remarkable happened. Something devastating happened. Because in verse 5, after this description of their attempts and their will and their purpose in building the city, the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men had built.

They didn't expect that. But that's exactly what happened. God looking down from heaven, it wasn't that he didn't know anything about it. He knew everything about it. But he bided his time.

And he let them build. And he let them build up to a certain height. And the city was reaching right up to the heavens as they had planned it. And they were well on the way towards their objective. And then all of a sudden, God decided, I've had enough of this. I'm coming down to see these children of men and their foolishness. And you see, their plans were that together, in the security that their own numbers, with their own outlook, brought them, in the building work that they were actually engaged in, that was their security.

[ 15 : 35 ] That was their way of being kept together and lasting and making themselves a name. That's what it says. Let's make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over the face of the earth.

And then the Lord came down. And the Lord intervened. And the Lord said, let's do the very thing that they are trying to avoid.

And he confused their languages. And they were scattered over the face of the earth. You see, that's what you get when you're trying to build without God.

And when your intention is that you will keep things together. And it looks so attractive to human eyes, to unbelieving eyes, to atheistic eyes.

It looks as if this is really going to be very successful. It has all the marks of success about it. But the result is division, confusion, insecurity, instability, fears, dissatisfaction.

[ 16 : 49 ] Because you can never fill the cravings, the desires of the human heart by leaving God out of it. That's what Isaiah is describing, this shapeless city.

The more people try and give shape to their lives, shape to their plans, shape to their future without God, the more shapeless it becomes. And there is nothing as shapeless as a life without God. Whatever it looks like to people themselves, this is how it actually is as God describes it. And not only that, but he goes on from talking about it as shapelessness to ruin when you come to chapter 25 there in verse 2.

You have made the city a heap, the fortified city, a ruin. It will never be rebuilt. Chapter 26, verse 5, similar. 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. See, Isaiah is really projecting things forward to the day of judgment as if God has already come.

[ 17 : 59 ] As if God has already come in his judgment against such attempts to frustrate his purpose and build an alternative to his city.

And the result of that is in chapter 24 and verses 7 to 13. The wine mourns, the vine languages, languages, all the merry-hearted sigh.

The mirth of the tambourines is stilled. The noise of the jubilant has ceased. The mirth of the lyre is stilled. The wasted city is broken down.

Every house is shut up so that none can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine. All joy has grown dark. The darkness of the earth is banished.

The gladness of the earth is banished. Desolation is left in the city. You see, when God comes and shows people his truth and comes to judge rebellion against himself, joy disappears.

[ 19 : 03 ] At least for these people. And that city that was once full of mirth and full of celebration as he puts it there, it's now full of fear. That insecurity, darkness, individualism has turned to loneliness.

It's a scary place in which to be when you're under the judgment of God. What he's describing here is not a film. It's not an apocalyptic work of fiction.

This is a real deal. These are real people he's describing. Yes, it's an imagery. It's an imagery that in a way is setting out something spiritual as if it was real physically in concrete physical terms.

That's to bring the description out to make it more graphic. But what God is describing for us here in terms of his judgment is a judgment of people. People like you and I. Real people.

And they're lamenting the day that they decided to live without God. There's the picture that God is giving to you and to me tonight.

[ 20 : 20 ] We turn to the alternative. Don't take your eye off this for a moment. Because it might describe somebody here. Have you all your life thus far been trying to achieve satisfaction for yourself?

Achieve security for yourself? Achieve acceptance for yourself without committing your life to God? Are you trying to bring a shape to your life without the shape of righteousness?

Without the shape that comes from being born again? Without the shape that comes from the work of the spirit in your soul? Well, you can never do it.

It's going to end in tragedy. It'll be part of this city. This unstable city that's going to be judged by God.

But wonderfully, in the midst of all of that, and there is darkness there, and there is solemnity there, and there's everything there to do with God's judgment and God's view of rebellion against himself, and God's ultimate overthrow of that.

[ 21 : 34 ] But notice in the midst of all that, there's also even in chapter 25, on this mountain, verse 6, the Lord of hosts, that's the mountain of Zion, of course, the church of God, the people of God.

The feast is the contrast with the terrible desolation of the city of destruction. And you can read through that yourselves and the wonderful promises that are there as Isaiah projects forward into New Testament reality.

He will swallow up death forever. The Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. There you see, that's the language of Revelation, isn't it? It's amazing that John, as God gave him to write the book of Revelation, was taken back to Isaiah to find words that describe that final state of God's redeemed, glorified people in terms of Isaiah's description of this wonderful city that gives security to the people of God.

God wiping away all tears from all faces. The alternative is the very opposite. Nobody to wipe away the tears, the agonies, torment of a lost eternity.

As Jesus himself described the state of the lost, where the worm dies not, the fire is never quenched. Isaiah, same terms, same reality.

[ 23 : 03 ] That's what he's telling us tonight. But let's move on positively to the unshakable city of God's salvation. Here's the contrast, because while there is all of that mourning in the lost, in terms of God's judgment of those who rebelled against him, in that day, this song will be sung in the land of Judah.

We have a strong city. You always find this in the Bible, where you have the salvation of God's people, you have coterminous with that.

You have at the same time in God's dealings with human beings, the overthrow, the destruction, the judgment, condemningly, of the lost.

You can put it the same way as well. Wherever you find the lost dealt with by God and his judgment, you find along with that the salvation of his people. Look at the ark, look at the days of Noah.

You find the two things side by side, don't you? You find the flood that takes away the wicked of Noah's day, and at the same time you find this ark which is carried up by the waters and inside, those who are saved from the flood.

[ 24 : 14 ] You see, that's always side by side throughout God's government of the universe. There is the lost, there are the lost, and there are saved. There is God's condemnation, and there is God's commendation of the people that are his own.

And the unshakable city of God's salvation, now you notice immediately, we have a strong city, that's those who know God's salvation, he sets up salvation.

You see, the contrast stayed away where the previous city was the work of human wisdom, where the previous city was the attempt of human beings to build without God, and obviously that's not going to last.

Here you find the builder is God himself. He sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. you keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you.

Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is a never lasting rock. You see, the contrast is immediate. What God builds is lasting. And these are the building blocks.

[ 25 : 24 ] First of all, he says here, we have a strong city, we have salvation as its walls and bulwarks. Going back to the kind of city you had in those days, fortified walls and bulwarks round about it for his defenses.

Well, there's the imagery for you of the security that God gives his people. You can't break through that. There is no power in heaven or in hell that can break through that.

Because God has placed it in its security permanently. You see the blocks that it's built off if you like. Righteousness, salvation, peace.

We have in all of that a strong city. Literally, a city of strength. Because it's not just describing it as a strong city, it's describing it as having strength essentially as a property of it.

God gives it strength. The strength it has is God given strength. And that's why it's so secure. That's why it's impregnable.

[ 26 : 35 ] That's why it's not going to fall to pieces when God comes to judge the world and judge human beings and human life. And the entrance to it is by righteousness and faithfulness.

He says here open the gates that the righteous nation that keeps faith or that is faithful may enter in. And righteousness of course is something that the New Testament expands on and opens up more for us.

Where especially you have righteousness as that status or state of life that God gives to his people in Christ. When you come to be justified by faith in Christ and you come to have Christ's righteousness imputed to you, put on your record, this is the righteousness as described or it certainly righteousness is a righteousness that the New Testament describes in those terms.

That's why it's secure. The only way that these walls are going to fall down is if God or someone from now to throughout eternity will suddenly find something wrong with what Christ has done.

And you know that's never going to happen. it's perfect. Unalterably perfect. That's why our hope is in him.

[ 28 : 04 ] Not in anything human hands can do or create or provide, however much we have to do certain things like that. So being right with God, having righteousness, being in a right relationship with him in Christ, through faith in Christ, as well as this peace that he talks about and this faithfulness.

In other words, the Bible always puts together, doesn't it, what you believe and how you live. It doesn't ever give us reason for thinking, well really it's how you live that counts and you can just do away with what you believe.

You can believe what you like, but as long as you live a sincere life, that's all that matters. God is saying, that's never satisfactory in my presence because there are things you have to believe about me, about yourself, about this Bible, about what God is saying he has prepared for us.

So you believe in Christ, you believe God, you believe his word, you believe his truth, and then that follows on into the kind of life that corresponds to that.

We all come short, we all fail in that respect, and nevertheless God continues to look at his people in Christ, and for his sake he continues to see us acceptable to him.

[ 29 : 27 ] So the entrance is there through faithfulness, but also in righteousness. That's a reminder to us, isn't it, that except a man be born again, cannot enter the kingdom of God.

You need a radical change from the very center of your being. God can do that, but God does that. Today when he commends to us that life, that Christ, that salvation, and commends it to us by way of appealing to us to accept it, this is really what comes with him, comes with Jesus.

When you have him, you have righteousness, you have the Holy Spirit living in your heart, in your life. You have his direction, you have his sanctifying power, you have hope based on truth itself, not on something flimsy, not hoping for the best in human terms, in worldly terms, but hoping in a positive way towards this final establishment of this eternal city in glory.

that's what belongs to God's people. Is it yours tonight? Is that your hope? Is that where you are in relation to God? Where do you find yourself tonight as these two cities are described?

Still living in the previous one? The one that will be destroyed or in Bunyan's terms the city of destruction that he fled from? Or in the city that has salvation as walls and bulwarks?

[ 31 : 11 ] The city that God is building and that in Christ has its foundation. That's where you and I surely want to be if we're not there already. And this security, not only salvation and its entrance, but he describes the security where he says here that you keep him in perfect peace.

You guard him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts in you. You might say, well, I believe I'm a Christian. I've been following the Lord for many years, but I've really never had perfect peace.

I've never had what I can call undisturbed peace, at least not for anything more than just moments, perhaps. How can he say here, you go on keeping him in perfect peace whose mind has stayed on you?

Well, because he's talking about peace, not in terms of our feelings or our emotions, our experiences inwardly, he's talking here about the complete peace that God has already created for us in Christ.

And it's there and it doesn't need to be added to. And it's not dependent on your circumstances. Remember Paul's writing to the Romans in chapter 5, this is how he began chapter 5, isn't it, where he says, Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God.

[ 32 : 38 ] Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God. Our faith locates with Christ by God's grace. And this peace then becomes ours, it's our property, passes over to us.

We have total security in Christ. No one can ever remove that from us. And even the judgment of God will only actually establish it as something real to everyone who sees it, rather than destroy it. And it's grounded, you see, in God himself. Sometimes the reason we say that we don't enjoy much peace is because we're looking for the foundation or the source of it in ourselves.

When we look to our own efforts, to our own prayers, to our own understanding, to our own way of seeking to meet with God's standards, all of these things.

And of course you fail, and of course you experience failure. But what Isaiah is saying here is, you keep him in perfect peace whose mind has stayed on you.

[ 33 : 53 ] Why? because, and I think if we translate it like this, it's better than brings across the point because in you, these words are really emphatic in Isaiah's verse here, so you can just translate it this way, you keep him in perfect peace whose mind has stayed on you because it is in you that he trusts.

there's the point. It's not the trust itself that creates the peace. It's the one in whom the trust is situated and located.

You keep him in perfect peace. You have a complete peace prepared for those who trust in you because it is in you that they trust. Because you are the foundation of their security, of their trust. where are you going to find assurance? Not in yourself, not in your own efforts, but you'll find it here in the dependableness of God, in the unchangeableness of God, in the faithfulness of God, in what God is to his people, because it is in you that they trust.

And that's why it then adds, trust in the Lord forever for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. It just really amplifies or reinforces that point that in him we have this tremendous foundation for peace, for well-being, for security, and nowhere else.

[ 35 : 34 ] And the appeal is therefore, trust in him, trust in the Lord forever, because if you want a definition of what a rock is, you begin with God.

You don't begin with the natural rocks of this world, however stable they might appear, they're just illustrative. Foundations of Edinburgh Castle, one day will be overthrown, but they're an illustration meantime, of the great rock, of the one who is dependable, and always will be, and that's God. God, this God of Isaiah, this God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, this God of the apostles, and of the prophets, and of the patriarchs, this God of Christians all the way through history, this God of God's believing people, this God who gives them security.

A tale of two cities dealt with very inadequately I'm sure. But Dickens finishes the tale of two cities where the hero Carton facing the guillotine and having witnessed a seamstress that was being prepared for death alongside him.

He spoke to her for a while. She was taken away and put to death, executed. And then he was made ready for the guillotine himself. This is what he said.

[ 37 : 15 ] It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.

You see, there's Dickens representing the triumph of good over evil, the triumph of faith over unbelief, the triumph of righteousness over ungodliness.

And all that is true of God and of his people as represented by the hero carton at that time. And so it is for God's people.

As Paul said to the Philippians, he talks about his own departure, to depart and to be with Christ is far better.

it's a far better thing that we do in placing our trust in Christ than we've ever done up to that point. It's a far better thing that we do when we leave this world safe in Christ than anything that's happened before that.

[ 38 : 21 ] It's a far better thing to go to be with Christ which is far better. But then you see, this hero carton has actually taken the place of another man called Darnay.

To save him from the guillotine, carton has gone and taken his place. He did it secretly, but he's now facing the guillotine and he's saying this, it's a far, far better thing that I do.

And isn't that how it was with the Lord? If we can, with respect, apply these words to him. When he came to face the cross, wasn't it true of him?

In his own estimation, in his own conviction, in his own consciousness, it is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done.

For the honor of his father, for the salvation of his people. And it is he who said, greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

[ 39 : 46 ] And you are my friends, he said, if you do whatsoever, I command you. May God bless his word to us. Let's conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 48, the psalm we had.

Psalm 48 and page 63, we're singing this time to the tune, University, singing verses 9 to 14. We contemplate your steadfast love within your house, O God, for like your name, your praise extends through all the earth abroad.

All that you do is righteous, Lord. Mount Zion's joy is great, and Judah's towns rejoice as they your judgments celebrate.

And of course, Zion there represents God's city, as it says in verses 12 and 13. We are charged not only to take account of the salvation as a great city of security that God has given us in Christ, but we are, as it says there, to pass on that to our children.

For this God who is our God forever will abide. He is our God forevermore, and to the end our guide. These verses to Tulin University.

[ 41 : 08 ] We contemplate your steadfast love within your house, God.

For like your name, your praise extends through all the earth abroad.

All that you do is righteous Lord, my God.

He is great and Judah's tongues rejoice as they your judgments celebrate.

Round Zion walk and counter turn, porque their meal every city■, so that two children yet unborn own story you may tell ■■ for God the Lord who is our God forever will abide he is our God forever more and to the end our guide if you let me get to the main door please after the benediction now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always amen