

## Isaiah 27 'From trial to triumph'

There's a first time for everything and, after 50 years of preaching the Word week by week, this is the first time I've ever preached on Isaiah 27 - quite a chapter, isn't it!? It's a tough one, but with the Spirit of God's help, we'll get there and pick up a few handfuls of purpose along the way. You'll notice from our reading that the chapter is punctuated 4 times with a short phrase of three words: 'in that day' - it pops up in verses 1 and 2, then again in verses 12 and 13.

It is a classic idiom, which is often used in the OT - you find it frequently appears in the major and minor prophets - one example is Zechariah 13, and it all points in one direction - to the coming day of the Lord. Paul has a lot to say about it in 1 Thessalonians 5, 2 Thessalonians 2, and elsewhere; the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24 talks about it too.

'That day' anticipates a time of trial, a time of trouble, a time of tribulation ... it's a day of devastation, destruction, doom, and damnation - so, when you see that phrase on the pages of Scripture, you need to remember that it's shorthand for an end-time scenario - it shines the torchlight on a day in the future when these things will come to pass.

Chapter 27 is all about a dragon if you're reading the KJV, also known as 'a monster of the sea' if you're reading some of the newer translations; then the prophet talks about deliverance and

destruction, and the chapter ends on a high note with a mix of delight and devotion.

It all kicks off in verse 1 with the Lord, the God of the covenant, dealing decisively with the monster-cum-dragon - the auld enemy is eliminated with the sword of the divine warrior - the battle is over ... and it comes to a rousing climax in verse 13 with a rescued people, a redeemed people, engaged in worshipping the Lord 'on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.' What a blessing!

So keep your Bibles open as we work our way through the chapter - we'll unpack it one section at a time ...

**The first section is all about a vanquished foe!**

Let's face it, it's not every day of the week that we read about a dragon on the pages of God's word - but here it is, in verse 1, and it's called Leviathan. All over the world in every continent there are myths and legends about dragons!

In China, for example, the dragon was long the symbol of the emperor and of the nation itself, the fierce, winged, reptile fire-breathing dragon. For those of us who live in the West, a dragon is usually depicted as evil, whereas, in Chinese folklore, it is seen as powerful, friendly, and the bringer of good luck!

There's a three-headed dragon on the coat of arms of the city of Moscow in Russia ... and, as I'm sure we all know, emblazoned on a green

and white background, a big red dragon features prominently on the national flag of Wales. Then, for all my English friends, there's the ancient and fascinating myth surrounding St George and the dragon ... you can Google that if you want to find out more!

Or think about Christopher Columbus as he sailed west in three ships ... all the sailors, to a man, were terrified of monsters of the sea. More often than not, there would be charts that would show the edge of the world and beyond, it would say: 'Here be dragons!' So there was a terror, a fear and dread of the unknown.

Here in verse 1, we have an epic battle where the dragon is trounced and terminated - a story where the real hero is the living God. The lesson is: God does what he does best - and his track record is impeccable, he deals with the enemies of his people - and that's the thrust of verse 1.

The big question is, who or what is Leviathan? In my opinion, the simple answer (as I hinted a moment ago) is that this is the enemy of the people of God. And God has it in for him and God wins the day! Why do I say that?

Well, when I read through the Bible, it seems to me that the archenemy, the adversary, of the people of God is Satan. And from the beginning, he mobilises human beings, along with his army of fallen angels, to do all kinds of things to you and I as the children of God. He doesn't like us, and he hates Jesus.

At the same time, read the OT, his antics are seen in his attitude to the Jewish people - there are pagan empires which are under his wing as they seek to wipe out the nation of Israel ... so, in that sense, such empires are under the sway of an unseen emperor, aka Leviathan, he's the one who is calling the shots from beneath the surface of the sea and behind the scenes. You have allusions to something similar in Daniel 7 and Revelation 13.

If we go further back in the history of Israel to the Red Sea crossing - the same kind of language is used in Psalm 74:13-14, where we read: 'It was you who split open the sea by your power, you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan ...' As a matter of interest, we also read of Leviathan in Job 3 and Job 41.

Then if you fast forward to Revelation 12 we see a battle going on in the heavenly realm between Michael, the archangel, and Satan who is 'the prince of the power of the air.' The result is that Satan is toppled and cast out of the heavens and cast down to earth - the Bible states that 'the great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.' He gets his comeuppance, and deservedly so!

The ultimate doom of Leviathan is spelled out for us at the end of Revelation, in 20:10, where we read that he is thrown into the lake of fire

forever, and in which he will be 'tormented day and night.' In other words, God wins!

Just a couple of thoughts before we move on:

Did you notice that Leviathan is described here in two different ways? He is, first, 'a gliding serpent' and, two, 'a coiling serpent.' Let's be clear, none of those are complimentary! He's a slithery, slimy, slippery serpent ... he is twisted and twisting, ready to pounce on an

unsuspecting target. And that's how he works!

Ask Eve in the Garden of Eden - she'll tell you!

Always has, always will ... until he gets taken out by one greater than Leviathan!

And that's what we also read in verse 1, for he is punished with the sword - it's portrayed in 3 ways for we read that, it is 'fierce, great, and powerful.' What is the sword? Simply put, it is the living word of the living God. We know that from Paul in Ephesians 6 and over in Hebrews 4:12.

The word is spoken and the enemy, Leviathan, is taken apart, he's taken down, he's taken out. Ah, such is the awesome power of the word of God.

The Bible says that 'the Lord will slay the monster of the sea.' When it comes to the final showdown, the dragon is the loser ... the Lord wins!

The next section in the chapter goes from verse 2 down to verse 6, and it's all about **a vineyard that is fruitful!**

These few verses are beautiful - we read them with a sense of keen anticipation because they

speak of a sovereign Lord's tender care for his people. Our hearts are warmed when we read of the faithfulness of God to his own. No wonder, we're told to sing a song about it ...

In fact, this is the second time in Isaiah where we have a song about a vineyard - the first is back in Isaiah 5:1-7 ... the problem with that vineyard is that it wasn't fruitful, nothing good came from those vines, it produced only bad grapes. So that's a song marked by sadness and sorrow - it's a song that is sung in a minor key.

But this one in chapter 27 is so significantly different ... this one is a happy song, it's a joyful song, you can clap your hands to it, you can tap your feet to it, it's upbeat ... see what God does, and this in a few lines is a glorious affirmation of his attributes:

**One**, he watches over it - yes, the one whose eye is on the sparrow is the same one who has two eyes watching over his people ... **two**, he provides for all its needs 24/7, for he 'waters it continually' - he gives needed refreshment to it, he replenishes it when required ... **three**, he 'guards it day and night' so he keeps it safe and secure - nothing and no one can harm or hurt it.

He sums it up eloquently when the prophet says of the Lord that he 'is not angry' - a better translation is the ESV which reads: 'I have no wrath, my wrath is gone.' His wrath is spent, he has unleashed his judgments and wiped out all but the remnant - his anger is gone; his people can now relax in the warm embrace of his love.

In fact, this underlines the truth that God is for us ... his comments in verse 4 imply that if the enemy did come after us, that God would leave them wishing they hadn't, they'll end up biting the dust. He will fight our battles, but we have nothing to fear for he reigns, he's in full control of all that's going on. He sees and he knows!

We know from the prophecy of Ezekiel that God finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked - so, here in verse 5, he offers forgiveness to those who are penitent, he invites them to turn from their sin and to come to him for refuge ... he longs for them to make peace with himself as the one who is Jehovah Shalom. (There's the gospel according to Isaiah 27.)

These words remind us, one more time, that it's a terrifying thing for the Lord to be your enemy, but what a delightful thing it is for him to be your God and Saviour! Ah, my friend, that's what you and I did when we knelt at the foot of the cross, and when we came as sinners to Jesus - we ran to him for refuge; like those in the OT era, we clung with both hands on to the horns of the altar, and he saved us and sheltered us!

We have a blessed finale in verse 6 for the net result is that 'Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.' Wow - a global blessing from a flourishing vineyard. Does that not ring a bell with you?

For me, it has echoes of the promise God first made to Abram in Genesis 12:3, 'I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I

will curse; and - *listen to this* - all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

A worldwide harvest of fruitfulness for Jacob and Israel - and, at last, in the kingdom to come, the Lord will have what he always intended from the onset of time, his people will be fruitful for all eternity. If you like, this was Plan A on the divine agenda.

The third section stretches from verse 7 down to verse 9, and it's all about a **vindication that is favourable.**

The six million dollar question is posed at the outset, where we read: 'Has the Lord struck her as he struck down those who struck her?' That leads to a supplementary question, which asks: 'Has she been killed as those were killed who killed her?'

Well, the straight answer to both questions is 'NO!' He hasn't treated his people in the same way as he treated his enemies - sure, he has punished them, he has chastened them, we read all about it in the OT: that's when the northern kingdom was roundly defeated by the Assyrians, and the tribes from the south were rounded up and deported by the Babylonians.

The sovereign Lord did what he had to do to get his people back onside ... he severely wrapped their knuckles so as to purify them. That was the clear purpose of God's discipline of them - it was to bring them back. There is hope right here, for there is a remnant! And what he did for them in the dim and distant past, and will do so again in

the future, he's doing in your life and mine even today.

The fourth section incorporates 2 verses, verses 10 and 11, and it's all about **a verdict that is frightening.**

By any stretch of the imagination, these two verses speak of utter devastation, of carnage, the scene we have here is one of total wipeout. Nothing left standing, all is razed to the ground. The place looks like a bomb has hit it - well, it has! God has moved in judgment and there's nothing but desolation and abandonment.

When God walks out on you, you've gotta be scared - for that's the picture painted here! The God who is their Maker doesn't feel any sense of pity for these rebel people groups; the one who is their Creator refuses to show them a morsel of comfort - you see, when nations and peoples slam the door shut in God's face, ultimately and, indeed, eternally, they are the losers.

They mess up, so they miss out big time. Ah, my friend, life is barren and the future is bleak when God is sidelined and left out of the picture!

The closing two verses in the chapter, verses 12 and 13, focus our attention on **a vision that is fulfilled.**

I'm massively relieved that the chapter didn't end with the last fullstop in verse 11 for that was all doom and gloom. But here is something bright and cheery. There is hope; it's a tangible kind-of hope, a triumphant hope - it all happens when the trumpet sounds!

Nothing unusual in that for Israel were familiar with the sound from the silver trumpets - calling the people together for one reason or another. The year of Jubilee is one example - every 50 years the people would assemble for worship, all debts were cleared, prisoners were freed, and families would be together - a time of rest, reunion, and rejoicing.

The Jewish people had 7 feasts in their annual calendar - one of which was the Feast of Trumpets - Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. That took place on the first day of the seventh month and prepared Israel for the annual Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur ... which, in turn, would prepare them for the Feast of Tabernacles, Succoth, which is a picture of the joy of the future kingdom (all there in Leviticus 23).

Again, we have the timeframe, 'in that day' - and it refers to a time of threshing - that's when the wheat is separated from the chaff. See what the great reaper is doing - he's separating the wheat of his people to himself. It's akin to what John the Baptist spoke of in Matthew 3:12.

He highlights the region extending from the 'flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt' and that represents the Promised Land. We know that, and they know that! But he reaches out even further to talk about those in Assyria and Egypt ...

a reminder that, in that day, our God will gather his people home, not en-masse but one by one. Here is a faithful, covenant God who specialises

in the personal touch. A remnant and it's all because of grace and mercy.

This is what the kingdom is all about - a nation regathered ... they are back in the Land ... and we know from verse 13, importantly, they are back to the Lord! See what they are doing - they are worshipping the Lord 'on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.'

Music for the millennium - you find it mentioned earlier in Isaiah, in chapters 2, 11, and 12. It's a high place for it's a mountain and truly exalted above all else, it's a holy place for the Lord is the centre of attraction and attention, it's a happy place for there is singing, and praise, and worship on its summit ...

the key is, God is there, the King is there, the sons of Abraham are there, and we are gathered there, drawn there, 'one by one.' What a story, a story of outrageously amazing grace. A powerful reminder that, come what may, the best is yet to come!