# The Whole Earth Laid Waste (Isaiah 24:1-16)

The vision of a land’s devastation and a city’s destruction in 24:1-12 could reflect calamities that came to a specific land and city, but if it does, they have become pictures of the destruction of national and city life in general when Yhwh acts to bring worldwide calamity.

Chapters 24—27 as a whole have been termed an “apocalypse”, another word for a vision or revelation. Apocalypses flourished in Israel much later than Isaiah’s day (the Greek word *apocalypsis* is the one John uses to describe the Book of Revelation). Thus it may be that chapters 24—27 come from a later period than that of the actual arrangement of chapters 13—23; this is the usual critical view. But precisely because the chapters hardly ever refer to specific nations or events, there is little hard evidence to go on regarding the question.

A vision of this kind appeals to our imagination. It invites us to bring to mind the kind of amalgam of impressions of disaster and its aftermath that tends in any case to form in our minds through television, films, and newspapers. We see a city reduced to rubble, futile hands scrabbling at debris in a desperate search to reach the source of a moan before the person dies, wailing mothers carrying the children killed in somebody else’s war.

Isaiah 24 takes up the desolation of such experiences in Israel’s life, but does that to point people toward even worse devastation. The Bible takes this life’s blessings as foretastes of and pointers to the great blessings of the End. It also takes the disasters that come upon the world that we know as foretastes of and pointers to the last great calamity that will overcome the earth. As we watch the combatants in successive outbreaks of war bombarding each other, or read chilling scenarios of life after a nuclear war, Isaiah 24 invites us to remember among other things that these are grim pointers to the last terrible day of calamity.

It then suggests two reactions to that. The prophet first hears voices all-over the earth declaring their response to this scene of ultimate devastation (verses 14-16a). We are not told who the voices belong to. It is the content of their response that counts. It consists in songs of joyful praise. The choirs who sing them know that the day of calamity is when wickedness is at last put down, evil eliminated, and God at last shown to be God.

Yet one cannot but be awed by it. The prophet is unable quite to join in with these songs of joy, but feels a quite different reaction (verse 16b). Overcome by the horrendous devastation of God’s world and the horrendous sin that led to it, the prophet can only feel a personal sense of desolation at the sight.

That reaction was part of what was involved in being a prophet. A prophet’s task was not to foretell inevitabilities but to tell people about calamities threatening them and blessings promised them, so that they could turn back to God’s ways and forestall this punishment, and trust God and open themselves to God’s blessings.