

Thoughts On Isaiah 24:5

Here is the verse:

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

And here is the verse in its context:

Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. 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 (Isa. 24:1-6).

And so it goes on...

All I want to do in this article is to underline certain facts which, it seems to me, stand out in this prophecy.¹

Clearly, God through the prophet is addressing ‘the world’, ‘the earth’, ‘the inhabitants of the earth’; that is, all men without

¹ As for the ‘everlasting covenant’, this cannot be the so-called covenant of works, since that it does not exist; it is nothing but an invention of covenant theologians – see my ‘The Covenant That Never Was’. The phrase ‘everlasting covenant’ is used in regard to the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:16), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:7), the Mosaic covenant (Lev. 24:8; 1 Chron. 16:17; Ps. 105:10), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 23:5) and the new covenant (Heb. 13:20-21). I am not convinced Isa. 24:5 refers to any of these, but if I had to choose one, it would be the Noahic.

exception. Moreover, God is speaking graphically of his judgment upon all men, all men without exception. And this – although the word is not used – is because of sin, can only be because of sin. Because all men have sinned, because all men are sinners, God visits his wrath and condemnation on all men. This is what the verse tells us. It is as Paul explained to the Romans:

All, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’... There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:9-23).

And because all men are sinners, all men are under the wrath of God:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom. 1:18).
[Even] you [believers] were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

This wretched state of affairs – that all men are sinners and under the wrath of God – arises from two sources.

First, all men sinned in Adam:

Sin came into the world through one man [that is, Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned... Many died through one man’s trespass... Because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man... One trespass led to condemnation for all men (Rom. 5:12-18).

In Adam all die (1 Cor. 15:22).

Secondly, all men are actual sinners in their own right, as the passage from Romans 3 proves. Indeed, that extract could have begun at Romans 1:18.

In Isaiah 24:5, God speaks of all men without exception breaking law – literally ‘laws’: ‘The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants;

for they have *transgressed the laws, violated the statutes*'. 'Laws' and 'law' here are virtually interchangeable.² What law is this? What law have all men without exception broken, and thus, as sinners, stand guilty before God?

This law cannot be the law of Moses, since God did not give that law to all men. He gave the Mosaic law uniquely to Israel (Deut. 4:1 – 5:33; 7:8-12; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:12-14; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). It was not given to Adam. It was not given to Abraham (Gal. 3:17). It was given to Israel – and only Israel – through Moses on Mount Sinai. Yet in Romans 5:17, Paul speaks of sin in the human race – sin in all men – in terms of trespass: 'Because of one man's *trespass*, death reigned through that one man' (Rom. 5:17). To trespass or transgress is to break a law:

Through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20).

Where there is no law there is no transgression (Rom. 4:15).

In addition, see Romans 2:1 – 3:29. Clearly, sin, law, trespass and transgression are inextricably linked in Scripture. These passages tell us that where there is no law there can be no sin – transgression being sin more precisely defined. At the very least, there can be no sin that can be objectively defined. This, it is clear, must not be confined to the Mosaic law. Why, even before Sinai, men died because of sin, their sin in Adam and their actual sin. And yet, as Paul declared:

To be sure, sin was in the world before the law [of Moses] was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law (Rom. 5:13).

And as John put it:

Sin is breaking of law (1 John 3:4, Holman Christian Standard).

² God foretold the new covenant: 'I will put my *law* within them, and I will write it on their hearts' (Jer. 31:33), and the writer to the Hebrews quoted the prophet thus: 'I will put my *laws* into their minds, and write them on their hearts' (Heb. 8:10). Whatever the explanation, there is no wedge to be driven between 'law' and 'laws'. As for 'statutes', statutes, judgments, testimonies, commandments and law are interchangeable. See Gen. 26:5; Ex. 18:16; Lev. 26:3,46; 1 Kings 2:3; Neh. 9:34; Ezra 7:10; Jer. 44:23; and dozens more.

All this leads to one inevitable conclusion. All men are sinners because all men are law-breakers. All men, therefore, are under law.³

Adam sinned because he broke God's command – God's law to him (Gen. 3). Israel sinned by breaking God's law – the Mosaic law given to Israel. So what about pagans?

Pagans are under law:

For all who have sinned without the law [that is, the law of Moses – pagans] will also perish without the law [of Moses], and all who have sinned under the law [that is, Jews] will be judged by the law [of Moses]. For it is not the hearers of the law [of Moses] who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law [of Moses] who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law [of Moses], by nature do what the law [of Moses] requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law [of Moses]. They show that the work of the law [of Moses] is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Rom. 2:12-16).

Consequently, pagans sin when they break the law of conscience (Rom. 2:12-15) and, supremely, when they refuse to obey God's command to repent and trust Christ (John 3:18-19,36; Acts 17:30).

Isaiah 24:5 is not the easiest verse in the Bible to understand. But I am convinced that it teaches us that all men are born under law, and they are sinners both in Adam and because they have broken the law that they are under.

³ Believers are under the law of Christ, and when they break that law they sin. For more on this, see my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*.