

# OpenTheo

## November 11th: Isaiah 24 & Mark 16

November 10, 2021



### Alastair Roberts

The Lord's judgment upon the whole earth. The resurrection.

My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here:

<https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you are interested in supporting this project, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share)).

You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Isaiah 24. 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. The wine mourns, the vine languishes, 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. No more do they drink wine with singing, strong drink is bitter to those

who drink it. 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. Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins.

For thus it shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is done. They lift up their voices, they sing for joy, over the majesty of the Lord they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord, in the coastlands of the sea give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel.

From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the righteous one. But I say, I waste away, I waste away, woe is me, for the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed. Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth.

He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken, the earth staggers like a drunken man, it sways like a hut, its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls and will not rise again.

On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in the pit, they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed, for the Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders.

The oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah chapters 13-23 started with an oracle against Babylon and ended with one against Tyre, pronouncing disaster upon nations and cities across the Near East. In chapters 24-27 we move from these specific oracles to a broader and more general statement of the Lord's judgement about to fall upon the earth. While some have termed this Isaiah's apocalypse on account of the cosmic scope of the judgement declared, as John Oswald argues, it lacks many of the typical visionary and symbolic features of such apocalyptic literature, the sort of features more familiar from the book of Revelation, and is better understood as eschatological.

The prophetic declarations about the Lord's judgements and acts of salvation coming upon the earth in these chapters are punctuated, as John Goldengay observes, with hymns responding to them, in which worshippers respond to the great deeds of the Lord. The material of these chapters does not provide clear indications of its historical context. At the heart of these chapters, as Christopher Seitz observes, is a city of uncertain identity.

mentioned in chapter 24 verse 10, chapter 25 verse 2, chapter 26 verse 5 and chapter 27 verse 10. Save for the city of which the men of Judah sing in chapter 26 verses 1-5, the references to a city are to a city that is judged or destroyed, yet no specific identifications are made. We are not told that the strong city of chapter 26 verse 2, for instance, is Jerusalem, or that the city to be destroyed is Babylon.

While these prophecies likely have an original historical occasion, a more immediate reference, the nonspecific character of the references should probably serve as an indication that the point of the prophecy, in its canonical situation, is not primarily a particular historical judgment, but a more general statement about the Lord's comprehensive judgment upon the earth, one that should not be restricted merely to one time frame, but which nonetheless does have concrete historical references. Seitz, Brevard-Chiles and many others relate the section chiefly to the time of Babylon and its downfall, but Gary Smith seems correct to emphasize the context where the actions of Assyria are more immediately in view. The entire world was indeed judged by the agency of Assyria, and would again be judged by means of the power of Babylon a century later.

The contrast between two cities is in some respects comparable to what we find in places like the end of the book of Revelation. Rather than seeking to identify the city to be destroyed with one particular city, it seems better, in the light of the nonspecificity of the text, to recognize that many cities might be comprehended under its figure. Already we have seen Babylon and Tyre's significance as global cities of their day.

The city of these chapters could be seen as a unifying figure for man's power and hubris, manifested in many various cities in Isaiah's day and in ours. It is the archetypal opposition between the city of man and the city of God. Alec Mottier hears allusions back to key stories of early Genesis, the stories of the flood and Babel.

Verse 18 is one of the only places in scripture that references the windows of heaven outside of the flood narrative, perhaps the greatest biblical account of cosmic judgment. Besides this, he notes references to the everlasting covenant, themes of the vine connected with Noah's planting of vineyard and reference to the curse. As in the flood, there is a sort of cosmic de-creation occurring, in which the earth will revert to an empty and desolate state, much as it was prior to the original creation.

The scattering of the people and the bringing down of the city also recalls the story of Babel, the precursor, of course, to Babylon. The judgment upon the earth is imminent. The opening verse describes what the judgment of the Lord will affect.

The emptying of the earth and the scattering of its people. The judgment will be comprehensive, affecting people of all ranks and stations. Verse 2 presents a series of opposed pairs, the tails and the heads of society.

No party will be immune. A structured and ordered society will be flattened in

undifferentiated judgment. The certainty of this judgment is founded in the certainty of the Lord's word.

The Lord has declared it, so it will surely come to pass. The prophecy assembles various sets of images of the disaster that will befall the earth. In verse 4, the disaster is compared to a dreadful drought that will cause everything to wither and languish.

In verse 5, the image is one of pollution, as the iniquity of the people, breaking the law and the covenant, has made everything unclean. In verse 6, the image shifts to a curse consuming the land like fire, burning its inhabitants and leaving little in its wake. It is the imagery of a vineyard, its harvest and the drinking of its wine that connects verses 7 to 13.

Times of joy and celebration will become grim and sorrowful. The jubilation of great festivals will be ended. Songs will be silenced.

Pleasures will be soured. The desolate city of verse 10 is described using a term familiar from Genesis 1 verse 2's description of the formlessness and void of the earth at the outset of the days of creation. The chaos and emptiness of the city is a de-creation.

Its inhabitants have either departed, abandoning their former dwellings, or they have retreated from the chaos to the extent that they can behind closed doors. As all joy and gladness flees from the devastated city, people call out for the wine and the feasts of the good times from which they have been firmly and finally banished. The situation will be similar to that after a harvest, where only a few scattered fruit could be found after the harvesters had gone through the fields.

Only the smallest remnant would remain. Verses 14 to 16 provide the first worshipful response to the just judgments of the Lord in the eschatological prophecy that precedes it. People around the world are summoned to join in the praise, from west to east to proclaim the glory of the Lord, all the ends of the earth joining in.

Perhaps we should understand these as the voices of the remnant gleanings of all of the nations. However, as Oswald suggests, the prophet might recognize that he will not know this great deliverance in his own days, which causes him to lament. His own time is one of treachery and the apparent triumphing of the wicked, all while the people of the Lord waste away.

As at other points in this chapter, wordplay accents the prophet's claims. The five concluding words of verse 16 are all forms of the same Hebrew root. The disaster awaiting the people of the earth is unavoidable.

If they run from one of its forms, they will fall into another form of it, and even if they were to escape that, they would be trapped in a third. It cannot be evaded. The very structure of creation is being shaken up.

As in the flood, the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth are shaken and tremble. All that people would depend upon starts to give way under them. The whole earth sways and totters, disoriented and unstable, like a drunken man.

The key expression, On that day, introduces the final statements of the chapter. Once again underlining the comprehensive character of his judgment, the Lord presents the judgment as occurring against the rulers in heaven and the kings on the earth. The hosts of the heavens here are probably not merely stars as symbols of human rulers and powers, but angelic powers placed over the nations, whose rebellion is to be judged.

We likely see such figures in references to powers like the Prince of Persia in the Book of Daniel. Much as in the Book of Revelation, these powers are to be imprisoned, locked up in the pit of Sheol, awaiting a final judgment. This great demonstration of the Lord's universal rule and his supremacy over all rebellious powers will lead to the shining forth of his glory, utterly eclipsing the glory of either sun or moon.

A question to consider, how might the general character of this chapter help us better to recognize commonalities between events such as Babel and the flood, to which it alludes, and other judgments upon the whole world order, such as that described in the Book of Revelation? Now when he rose early on the first day, he was he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Afterward, he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

And he said to them, Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe.

In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison it will not hurt them. They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.

And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. Mark chapter 16 is the final chapter of the Gospel of Mark. It's the climax of the story, but it also raises a number of difficulties, as verses 9-20 aren't in the oldest extant versions of the text.

The chapter begins with the two Marys and Salome, the same three women as were at the foot of the cross, first buying spices and then going to the tomb to anoint the corpse of Jesus. The fact that they are bringing spices suggests that they were not anticipating the resurrection despite Jesus' words. Possibly they considered Jesus' statements about his resurrection as more of a cryptic statement, not to be taken literally.

They come very shortly after dawn, and they are wondering about how to remove the large stone, but it has already mysteriously been moved. This is strange due to the size of the stone, and how difficult it would be to move it. Going inside the tomb they see a young man dressed in a white robe, striking enough to be seen in the darkness of a tomb.

White clothes as we see elsewhere in scripture are associated with heaven, they're heavenly clothes. He's sitting there, which is strange, he's clearly not an ordinary bystander, but has the hallmarks of an angel, and their response is to be very afraid. He gives them the message that Jesus has risen, his body hasn't been taken, he is raised from the dead and has moved on, and he invites them to see the place where his body was, to see that it has gone, to be witnesses of what has taken place.

Jesus has moved on ahead of them, they need to catch up. This isn't just someone who almost died and then revived and came to, and then is limping away. Christ is moving with the speed, the alacrity that we see elsewhere in the gospel.

He's the one who does things straight away, suddenly, immediately. And here we see Christ again going before them, he's leading the way, he's calling his servants to a staging ground of a new mission, and he's calling them back to the site where it all began, in Galilee. In Mark chapter 14 verse 28, Jesus had already declared that he would see them in Galilee after his resurrection.

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee. The man instructs the women to tell the disciples and Peter. The fact that Peter is spoken of in distinction from the disciples suggests some breach has been created after his denial.

Although he is still associated with the disciples, he does not see himself truly as one of them in the same way. There is need for restoration, and the fact that the women are sent with a message for him as well as the other disciples already hints at such a restoration occurring. What we see here is a sort of lesser commission.

There is a greater commission coming up, but here the women are sent with a message to the disciples. They flee from the tomb in trembling and astonishment and don't tell anyone because they were afraid. In Matthew's account we see that the commission had to be given by Christ himself to the women before they passed it on to the disciples.

Matthew chapter 28 verses 9 to 10, And behold, Jesus met them and said, Greetings. And

they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid.

Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. Should verses 9 to 20 be included in the Gospel of Mark? Historically these have been taken as scripture by the church, but in two of the oldest extant texts they are absent. There seems to be none Markan terminology and style according to certain authors and commentators.

Some have argued that what we see here is a pastiche of elements from the Gospels, Acts and other sources, and it's not really Mark at all. Some argue that Mark intended to end his Gospel at verse 8, perhaps to put the ball in the reader's court. This strange ending invites the reader to come into the story and to think about what happens next, how do they respond.

Others claim he meant to go on, but he didn't. Perhaps he wanted to complete it but didn't have the opportunity. Some say that an original ending might have been lost, and others that there were alternative yet genuine versions of Mark in circulation.

So the shorter ending and the longer ending were both genuine versions of Mark, from Mark's hand, but both circulated in different quarters. Nicholas Lunn makes a persuasive case, for me at least, that verses 9 to 20 come from Mark's hand and that they were his intended ending. He dismantles first of all the claim that the language and style is not Mark's.

He shows that if we applied the same criteria to undisputed texts throughout the Gospel, we would be led to dismiss them too. So it seems strange that we would apply here what we would not apply to other parts of the Gospel. If Mark 16 has much the same sort of degree of variety as we find in other Markan passages, then why shouldn't we accept it as genuine? Furthermore, the absence of the longer ending in the two oldest extant texts isn't the slam-dunk that some think.

First, we have references to the longer ending in texts that long predate these manuscripts, so within certain of the Church Fathers and elsewhere. Second, the actual texts in question give suggestive evidence that their copiers were aware of longer versions of the ending, and that they were either purposefully excluding them, in one case, or perhaps leaving space for them to be added at a later point, in the other case. His most persuasive arguments, for me at least, however, are literary and thematic.

Some of these are stronger than others, but together I think that they make a strong case. First, the conclusion involves a thematic return to the beginning of the Gospel. The Gospel begins with the forerunner at the beginning, and it ends with the successors.

Jesus comes from Galilee at the beginning, and he goes to Galilee at the end. Second, John the Baptist begins with preaching, and then the disciples end with preaching.

There's third, the descent of the Spirit from heaven, and then at the end, the ascent of Christ into heaven.

Then there's the calling of disciples to become fishers of men, and then the sending of the disciples out into the world to be fishers of men. And then fifth, John foretells the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and then Jesus speaks of the Pentecostal signs that will follow his disciples. There are verbal connections too.

Only in the prologue, in verse 3, and in the epilogue do we find the term Lord being used of Christ by the narrator. Second, the term baptism is very important at the beginning and the end, but yet is absent throughout much of the rest of the Gospel, except used in reference to things that aren't related to Christian baptism. The expression, preach the Gospel, is found in verse 14 of chapter 1 and in verse 15 of chapter 16.

These are the only occasions with the active form of this verb and noun combination. And then fourth, the relationship between preaching and faith is prominent in both places, in verse 15 of chapter 1 and in verse 16 of chapter 16. These features for Lund suggest that Mark intended an inclusio, a book ending of the material of his Gospel.

We see the same thing in Luke and we see it in Matthew as well. Beyond this, there are themes of prediction and fulfilment throughout Mark's Gospel. We have a lot of different predictions and then these are fulfilled step by step.

In Mark 10 for instance, verses 32 to 34, and taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles, and they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise. It would be strange indeed if Mark, after highlighting the fulfilment of each aspect of Jesus' prophecy concerning his death, didn't end with a very strong witness to the resurrection. Lund notes that Mark uses foreshadowing on occasions in his Gospel and observes the way that various elements of the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, a story that anticipates Jesus' own resurrection, these elements reappear in the ending of chapter 16.

He identifies nine such related phrases. Beyond this, he argues, verses 1 to 8 and verses 9 to 20 of chapter 16 are two paralleled frames of narrative. He shows that both of these two blocks of verses can be broken down into four sections each, and these four sections parallel each other.

Both, for instance, begin with Mary Magdalene on the first day of the week. Both contain a climactic speech with key expressions, Go tell, and he has risen, in the first, and then go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel, and that he had risen, in the second. It's concluded by a response to speech, and they went out, and they said nothing to anyone,



in the first, and they went out and preached everywhere, in the second.

It seems that these things are being held alongside each other. We're supposed to see a parallel, and we're also supposed to see a movement up. There's this initial fearful appearance, then there's the appearance to Mary Magdalene, the one, and then there's the appearance to the eleven, where they are sent out into the world and commissioned to preach the Gospel.

The themes of faith versus fear and unbelief that are throughout Mark's Gospel also come to the foreground at the end, with this emphasis upon the one who has faith, and the way that they should not be fearful, they should not be people of unbelief. Beyond this, we can also see Exodus themes, Lunn argues. Many have identified Exodus themes as structuring the story of Mark, Ricky Watts being a good example of this.

There is an appearance that reminds us perhaps of the appearance of God to Moses at the burning bush, there's a commission to go, as Moses was commissioned for the Exodus. There's belief and disbelief as a theme. There's picking up serpents.

Where else have we seen that before? Moses picks up a serpent. He takes up a serpent, and it's a sign of the Exodus. Hard-heartedness, that's something that the disciples are challenged for.

It's a constant theme within the story of the Exodus, both in reference to Pharaoh and in reference to the people of Israel. And then there's the speaking and performing signs, as Moses did. And then finally, an interesting reference, the casting out of seven demons from Mary Magdalene.

Lunn suggests that there is a parallel perhaps here between the seven nations that are cast out of the land. In Deuteronomy chapter 7 verse 1, when the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Gurgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you. These are a selection of the arguments that Lunn makes in his book, and I highly recommend it.

A recurring theme at the beginning here is that of unbelief. They're told this message of Christ's resurrection, and they don't believe it. They're told it first of all by Mary Magdalene, then they're told it by the two who see him in another form on the way, and then finally Jesus has to appear to them himself and rebuke them for their hard-heartedness.

He had told them that he would rise from the dead, and they just had not believed. This might remind us of other incidents within the Gospel, perhaps particularly those events on the boat, where they had failed to believe in Christ's power over the storm. As we

read through those, I noted the parallels between those and the themes of resurrection, and once again I think these give supportive evidence to the legitimacy of reading chapter 16 in its full form as part of Mark's text.

They are commissioned to go into the world and to preach the Gospel to all the creation. This is a cosmic message that they're bringing out, and as they do so, they're supposed to declare that he who believes and is baptized will be saved. But whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Many have found these verses troubling, the suggestion of baptismal regeneration for instance, but baptism has always been an essential part of the process of becoming a Christian. It doesn't mean that if you're not baptized you can't be saved, but it does mean if you're not baptized that there is something seriously wrong. It's unusual.

It's like being a king without having a coronation, or being married without having a ring. Baptism really is integral to the process of becoming a Christian, and it isn't just something that confirms something that is already the case, although that's part of what it means. It's also an entrance into the reality of what salvation means.

It's an entrance into the life of the body of Christ, the life of the Church, the life of the supper. While people are rightly cautious about the idea that baptism is automatically a ticket of salvation, it isn't automatically so. It requires belief.

It is not from scripture that we get any warrant to downplay baptism. Throughout scripture it's spoken of as the washing of regeneration. Peter says that baptism now saves us.

Paul in Romans chapter 6 speaks of us being baptized into Christ and dying and rising again with him. None of this language suggests a magical power of baptism, baptism acting irrespective of the faith or unbelief of the person, and just magically zapping them into salvation. That's not what's happening here.

In many ways, baptism's relationship to salvation is more like the relationship between a wedding and a marriage. A wedding is the means by which a faithful couple enter into the union of a marriage. It is a sign of their union, and it's a seal of their union together.

It's a public manifestation of it. And baptism is all of these things too. But just as a wedding entered into by unfaithful people would lead to a hollow marriage, so baptism is not a guarantee of salvation apart from faith.

Yet on the other hand, while people can be saved without baptism, to lack baptism is to lack something very important, like a common law marriage where there was nothing resembling a wedding. Jesus promises that signs will follow those who believe. Presumably we should take this as referring to the disciples in particular.

They are the messengers. They are the apostles being sent out with the message of the gospel. And as they do so, they will have these signs that confirm that message.

Hebrews chapter 2 verses 3 to 4 says, It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. This speaks as if this stage of the ministry had already been completed. That what Jesus is referring to is specifically the ministry of the apostles, not the ministry of the church more generally, although there are ways in which what is true of the ministry of the apostles extends to the rest of the church.

In John chapter 14 verse 12, Jesus also declares to his disciples, Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. And then in Mark chapter 3, 14 to 15, And he appointed twelve whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. Jesus is commissioning his disciples here again, giving them authority and power to have signs that confirm the message of the gospel that he has given them.

The strange signs that particularly invite discussion are the ones of handling snakes and of drinking poison. The handling of snakes, as I've already noted, reminds us of the story of Moses and the sign given to him as he preaches in Egypt. But it also anticipates an event with Paul at the end of the book of Acts.

In Acts chapter 28 verses 3 to 6, When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.

He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

As regards the drinking of poison, Eusebius records the story from Papias, which he received from Philip's daughters. That justice named Barsibus drank a deadly poison without consequences. Justice, of course, along with Matthias, was one of the two that was considered to take the place of Judas in Acts chapter 1. A question to consider, how do verses 19 to 20 help us to understand the character of the church's mission in relationship to the work of Christ?