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<sup>6</sup> On this mountain, the LORD of heavenly forces  
will prepare for all peoples a rich feast, a feast of choice wines,  
of select foods rich in flavour, of choice wines well refined.  
<sup>7</sup> He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples,  
the shroud enshrouding all nations.  
<sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death forever.  
Isaiah 25:6-8a (NRSV)

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What do you think about ‘climate-change’? I introduce this topic today not to debate the ‘existence’ of ‘climate-change’ or its scientific veracity. We all know there are those who have been labelled as ‘sceptics’ or ‘deniers’ about ‘climate change’. I think we also know there are many who speak of ‘climate change’ in terms of ‘doomsday scenarios’. And the reason I introduce this topic is in the area of the ‘doomsday scenarios’ that are often proffered that increases anxiety, and is designed to try and create discussion or concern or some sort of ‘action’.

When it comes to many discussions about ‘climate change’ there are various ‘narratives’ or ‘ways of presenting’ that try to evoke a response. It is not uncommon to hear about some animal species that could be wiped out, or some challenges ahead in food production, or some sort of significant environmental impact. What happens here in these sorts of discussions is to try and create some sort of ‘concern’ or ‘anxiety’ about a perceived possible problem to try and elicit some sort of response. This is a classic ‘change-management’ technique. The idea is to try and create some sense of ‘urgency’ and ‘crisis’ by speaking about what is wrong and what the results of this will be (real or not), then to introduce a different vision and set of values, in order to drive people to act in a different way.

All around we hear people speaking in ways that are designed to increase our sense of anxiety (note the way TV news is now presented). We may also experience people around us who have a sense of anxiety themselves, and they try to project this upon others so they themselves may feel more comfortable about themselves. We all experience anxiety at times, but we live in a world now that often aims to increase our sense of anxiety. And anxiety in terms of mental health is when these anxious feelings don't go away – when they're ongoing and happen without any particular reason or cause. It's a condition that can makes it hard to cope with daily life.

Everyone feels anxious from time to time. We wonder what the future may hold.

As Christians we have another ‘reference point’ as we look at the world around us, and that is heaven itself. Here we must also realise that when we speak of

heaven, it is not to be seen as the place of the great escape. It is true that in heaven we leave our troubles behind. But heaven itself also because a reference point for being able to live in this world in a way that God would want for us. Heaven is a reference point for positive daily living, because heaven gives us hope.

Have we as Christians become less proficient in speaking about heaven in a way that enables us to live positively engaged in our world today. In other words, could we have lost an 'eternal perspective' on the way we look at life (and the decisions we sometimes have to make)? All around it seems that people are actually trying to increase our levels of anxiety. People marketing products try to give us a sense that we are 'missing out' in order to sell a product. News reports are designed to increase anxiety as news presenters speak often speak with trained serious looks and 'live-crosses' and the like. Work places either directly or indirectly create a sense of anxiety to try and change productivity or performance. Even parents may do this with their children.

How does the Bible respond to this? We hear:

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God." Philippians 4:6.

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Matthew 6:33.

"We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28.

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4.

How often are such verses quoted at funerals, or other such 'significant times' in life?

When we come to our Bible verse for today, from Isaiah 25, we come to a section of Scripture that highlights a glorious future for God's people. Our God says: "6 On this mountain, the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples a rich feast, a feast of choice wines, of select foods rich in flavour, of choice wines well refined. 7 He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples, the shroud enshrouding all nations. 8 He will swallow up death forever. Isaiah 25:6-8a

But what is spoken in the chapter before (Isaiah 24)? We hear: "Now the LORD is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate... 3 The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the LORD has spoken this word. (Isaiah 24:1,3). Then we read in Isaiah 25 that God will prepare a great banquet for those who trust in Him.

It is important to recognise this 'darkness' in this world. We don't like to look at this darkness. It voids our enjoyment of the blessings in life that God has given

us. But it is only when we see this 'darkness' for what it is that we can truly see what it means when God speaks of giving us a rich banquet.

It is rare in the Bible for a feast of food and wine to be described in detail. In prophetic books, lavish feasts are a sign of decadence and selfishness. When the fat of the animal is referenced positively in the Bible, it is burned as an offering to God. The fat and the marrow are the best parts of the animal and we are instructed to give the best we have, the 'first fruits' as sacrifice to the LORD. But here in Isaiah 25, the fat of the animals is served by God to God's people. God is the host and the people are the ones who sit down for the feast. Not only is the table laden with the fat of the fatted calf, but all manner of rich foods. The quality of the wine is described twice, as 'well-aged wine' and 'aged wine well-refined.' In a reversal of Old Testament sacrificial liturgies, the feast is set by God for the people, who eat with celebration, joy, and harmony.

God feasts, but not of the food. The LORD's consumption is to 'swallow the covering that is cast over all people, the veil spread over all nations.' This veil covering the people is death. Death is swallowed up in victory. For Christians, what else could this mean but the victory of God in Christ through the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

St. Paul dramatically closes the discourse on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 by calling on this image: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? . . . Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus in the Gospel of John, in the midst of grieving over the death of His friend Lazarus, raises him to life again. Here, Jesus' own weeping names for us the sorrow of death; we grieve the loss of our loved ones, feeling their absence. But in Jesus' action of raising Lazarus we also see that Jesus is the One who has power over death. In Him we find the hope and the promise of the resurrection life. This also gives us hope in the life we are called to live on this earth.

The original context of Isaiah 25 is the impending destruction upon surrounding nations, prior to Israel's and Judah's own devastation (in the time of Isaiah, and that which follows him). But God reassures us of a glorious future which gives a present hope.

This feast celebrates Christ's victory over all His enemies. How long will His victory last? "He will swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25:8). Jesus Christ destroyed death forever; we shall not die again. Jesus said, "Because I live, you will live also." The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:8). The LORD wipes your tears. Think about that for a moment... The LORD wipes your tears.... Additionally, He removes all our shame and disgrace. Sin was our shame, but Jesus Christ removed it. Sin is shame, and the only one who can remove it is the Lord Jesus Christ.

What do God's people do in response to God's dealing with their sin, death, and disgrace? Celebrate and sing. So we read that God's people will come from all over the world to His great feast and sing His praises. This chapter can be divided into three sections: In verses 1-5 we see singing; verses 6-8 describe the feast; verses 9-12 speak about God's people singing again.

In Isaiah 25:1 we find the first song: "O LORD, You are my God." Notice, it is my God! Those two letters are very important. People are coming from far and wide, acknowledging that the God of Israel is their God. Then they sing, "You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat" (v. 4). So also we can sing, "You are my God. You are my refuge. You are my shelter. You are my shade." Then in Isaiah 25:9 we read, "In that day they will say, 'Surely, this is our God.'"

Here is a 'feast' here on this earth for people of the faith. And this feast is one where we can experience heaven on earth; for the party-wall between God and the world has fallen down: death is no more, and all tears are for ever wiped away – by God Himself!

We have confidence and joy, because God has given us a banquet. We can truly celebrate life on this earth because of the resurrection of Jesus. There is a place for you at this celebration through the sacrificial death of Jesus. You hear that invitation repeated each time you open His Word or think about your baptism or receive His holy Supper. There is a heavenly banquet before you in Christ Jesus. The feast is ready! Come to the feast! Amen.