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December 7th: Isaiah 50 & Luke 12:1-34

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Alastair Roberts

The Servant's faithfulness in suffering and confidence in vindication. Jesus teaches the multitude.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 50. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.

But the Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced, therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord God helps me. Who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment.

The moth will eat them up. Who among you fears the Lord, and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord, and rely on his God. Behold, all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches, walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled.

This you have from my hand. You shall lie down in torment. In Isaiah chapter 49 Zion was

spoken of as a widowed woman who had lost her children.

Yet in the Lord's grace her children were restored to her, and her land, once vacant and barren, so filled with her restored offspring that there was barely space to contain them. Chapter 50 addresses not a mother, but the children of a mother who wonder whether she has been rejected and cut off. In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 1-4 provision is made for cases of divorce by which a man could send away a wife deemed unfaithful by writing her a certificate of divorce.

Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 8 also compares the Lord's rejection of the northern kingdom of Israel to such a decree of divorce. However the question of the Lord to his people here is where, if he has indeed utterly cast them off, their mother's certificate of divorce is, where is the evidence that he has so rejected her? Another possible situation where a woman was cut off from her husband was where the family was in such terrible debt that members had to be sold into slavery until the debt was repaid. Yet the Lord clearly does not have creditors to be repaid.

The Lord is not anyone's debtor nor has he committed any wrong for which he must make restitution. The explanation for the sending away of Zion is solely to be found in the people's own sin. The Lord is disciplining his people for their iniquity and rebellion, but the fundamental relationship between the Lord and his people has not ended.

The people's belief might be that this communication breakdown was on the Lord's side. However the Lord's follow up questions explode this perception. The Lord asks why, when he came, no one was to be found and why, when he addressed them, no one responded.

It's not as if the Lord was silent in his relationship with Israel. He persistently addressed his wayward people through the prophets for instance, yet without response. Perhaps they simply don't believe that the Lord is able to redeem or deliver them.

This would be a strange belief indeed. Their God is the one who can dry up the seas and the rivers, much as he did in the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. He is the master of the very stars in the heavens, of both the chaotic forces of the deep and the great powers of the celestial heavens.

Both the deep and the heavens often provide symbols of earthly powers. In declaring his sovereignty over these realms, the Lord is also declaring his sovereignty over analogous human powers. He is the sovereign, both in the abyss of exile and in the throne room of kings.

Zion has been unresponsive and resistant to the word of the Lord, her divine husband. However, in verses 4-9, the voice of the servant, the one who was faithful where Israel was not, the one who would be the means of bringing back Jacob, is heard once more, in

the third of the so-called servant songs. His is the voice of one who is faithful and responsive to the word of the Lord, one who hears and obeys.

He is the exemplar of faithfulness to an unfaithful nation. If Israel and going after idols became progressively more like them, unresponsive, insensible, immobile and hardened, hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving, the servant, in his responsiveness to the Lord, is quickened in his senses and enlivened in his capacities. His tongue is equipped for action, perhaps recalling the way that his tongue was compared to a sharp sword in the preceding chapter.

We might also think of the way that Isaiah's lips were prepared for bearing the word of the Lord back in chapter 6, with one of the seraphim touching his lips with a burning coal. Having been taught, the servant is able to speak with wisdom and skill in a manner that sustains and revives others. Each morning, the Lord opens the ear of the servant as that of an attentive disciple.

In contrast to the nation, the servant is neither rebellious nor turns back from the Lord's instruction. In the preceding chapter, in verse 7, the servant was described as one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers, and as lamenting that he had laboured in vain and spent his strength for nothing and vanity. The suffering of the rejected and mistreated servant comes into clearer view in verse 6. The servant submits to cruel and shameful treatment, treatment that was intended not merely to cause pain, but deeply to dishonour.

We are not told more about what occasioned this mistreatment, nor those who showed it. However, the servant faithfully endures it, confident in the Lord's vindication. The description of the suffering yet resolute servant, with his face set like flint before his persecutors, is similar to that of suffering, rejected and cruelly treated prophets such as Jeremiah.

As part of his call in Jeremiah chapter 1, verses 17-19, the Lord tells Jeremiah what he is to expect. In this, as in other respects, the suffering servant should be seen as being in continuity with the prophets, and not merely as a royal sufferer. While I do not believe that John Goldengate and others who identify the servant with the anonymous prophet who supposedly wrote what is called Deuteronomy, are correct in that identification, they are not mistaken in recognising the prophetic character of the figure.

The confidence of the servant in the teeth of such opposition is found in his assurance of the Lord's vindication. If the Lord is with him, what adversary or accuser could ultimately be successful against him? No matter how many or how powerful his opponents, they cannot withstand the sovereign power and justification of the Lord himself. The legal overtones of the conflict here should not be missed.

The apostle Paul almost certainly alludes to this passage in Romans chapter 8 verses 31-

34 where he writes, Paul proceeds to compare Christians to those regarded as sheep to be slaughtered in the verses that follow this, probably referencing the next servant's song of chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12. This suggests that Paul sees the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah, not merely in Christ himself, but also in his people. In the concluding verses of the chapter, the servant's speech ends and another voice enters, perhaps that of the prophet.

The people are addressed, asking which of them fears the Lord, the fundamental posture of reverence that is at the beginning of wisdom. Who obeys the voice of his servant, much as the servant himself heeds and observes the word of the Lord? Those who do should follow the servant's example, trusting the Lord in the darkness, awaiting the vindication of the Lord's promised dawn. Their justification and deliverance would come in its due time.

In stark contrast, all of those who kindle their own fires, seeking alternatives to the Lord's vindication, in idolatry, sorcery, trust in worldly powers and other such things, are sarcastically told that they should walk by their light. However, they are warned that they will thereby end up in torment. A question to consider, where, prior to the day of Isaiah, might hearers of this prophecy have looked to for examples of suffering servants of the Lord? Luke, chapter 12, verses 1-34 In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do.

But I will warn you whom to fear. Fear him who, after he is killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God? Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

And when they bring you before the synagogues, and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself, or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. Someone in the crowd

said to him, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. But he said to him, Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you? And he said to them, Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

And he told them a parable, saying, The land of a rich man produce plentifully. And he thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this, I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink, and be merry.

But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God. And he said to his disciples, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Consider the ravens, they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith? And do not seek what you are to eat, and what you are to drink, nor be worried.

For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your father knows that you need them. Instead seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide your souls with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches, and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

In Luke chapter 12 Jesus warns against the leaven of the Pharisees. This is the hypocrisy that they have within themselves. They pass on from generation to generation, just as the mixture of the leaven is put into a new loaf, and then that is placed to a new loaf still.

So the leaven of the Pharisees is the hypocrisy that generation after generation they pass down, with the result that all affected by it are corrupted. But the time is coming when things in secret will be revealed openly. Open proclamation will take the place of

private teaching.

And the disciples of Christ must not be fearful. They must declare openly what Christ has declared in private, declaring from the rooftops what his word is. Such open proclamation would be the first thing to fall by the wayside in the case of fear.

And the point here is not merely that of not being afraid. It's a calling to be bold, to go forward, and to face all the challenges. You should not fear being persecuted, because persecution associates us with our Master, and our Master is greater than any persecutor.

They cannot kill the soul, only the body. If he notices even the sparrows fall, how much more will God notice his children who lay down their lives in his service? Every hair on our heads is numbered. If we confess Christ before men, he will confess us before his Father in heaven.

Success in this mission will look different from what success in missions usually looks like. Disciples will find themselves brought before rulers and authorities and synagogues and having to defend themselves in such contexts. But the Holy Spirit will give them the words on the day that they need them.

Whoever speaks against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Son of Man will not be forgiven. There are two ages and two visitations. In the story of Joseph, there's that first visitation to his brothers as he tells them his dreams, and they reject him.

And then he comes again when he delivers them in Egypt and gives them food. Moses visits the first time and he tries to act as the judge for his brothers, the Israelites, and they reject him. And then he comes again and delivers them from Egypt.

Jesus, in the same way, he comes the first time in his earthly ministry and he's rejected. Then he comes the second time in the message of the church as he gives his spirit to the church and if that message is rejected, final destruction awaits. Jesus at this point is surrounded by thousands of people who are almost trampling each other.

And a man calls from this crowd, calling Jesus to act as an arbiter between him and his brother in a quarrel concerning inheritance. But Jesus refuses to adjudicate. Rather he talks about the danger of covetousness and preoccupation with possessions.

And he tells the story of a rich fool. This rich fool seems to be a skilled farmer, someone who's so skillful and effective that he needs to build bigger barns. And he has everything mapped out, but he has not considered the way that he stands relative to God.

He seeks to plan his life without any reference to God and with little awareness of the precariousness of human life and wealth. And when his life is required of him, his bigger

barns are of no use. All his wealth that he has built up while on earth is of no service.

He had laid up treasure for himself and he was not rich toward God. Like Solomon, Jesus draws attention to the creatures and God's concern and provision for them. Once again the issue is our attitude to material possessions and provisions.

We are to adopt a posture of dependency upon God for our daily needs. Worry and anxiety is far more likely to diminish our life than to extend it. And there is some assurance to be found in this reminder of the limits of our power.

This isn't a denial of the value of prudence and provision for ourselves, but rather a spiritual posture to be adopted, with anxiety being the alternative. This connects with Jesus' teaching concerning daily bread that we look to God for provision for these things. There's a contrast between worry and faith.

To whom are we looking? In the parable of the sower, it is the worries of this world and a deceit of wealth that act like thorns that choke the seed. And we must beware that this does not befall us. What is our priority? It should be seeking the kingdom.

Everything else is second. That is where we will ultimately find security, as we lay up riches toward God, rather than towards ourselves. Ultimately Jesus' disciples should not need to fear on this front.

Although they are only a little flock, the Father desires to give them the kingdom, and he will give them the kingdom. He is a good father and they can look to him to provide. Jesus recognises that motives don't float free, but they can be nudged and pulled by material situations and conditions.

The problem is the loss of material wealth, and the alternative is to invest your resources in spiritual things. The heart will tend to follow your resources. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Put your money where you want your heart to be, and where it is not vulnerable to loss, and where it won't place your heart in the same jeopardy. Selling possessions and giving to the needy is a means by which to dislodge your heart from its false attachments. It also builds up riches where they cannot be lost or destroyed, building up riches towards God.

The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. A question to consider, what in Jesus' teaching can we truly possess, and how can we come to possess it?