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November 13th: Isaiah 26 & Luke 1:24-56

November 12, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The earth will give birth to the dead. The annunciation of the birth of Jesus.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 26. In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah. We have a strong city.

He sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks. Open the gates that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. You keep him in perfect peace whose mind has stayed on you, because he trusts in you.

Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust.

The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy. The path of the righteous is level. You make level the way of the righteous.

In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you. Your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul. My soul yearns for you in the night.

My spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the

inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness.

In the land of uprightness, he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the Lord. O Lord, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people and be ashamed.

Let the fire for your adversaries consume them. O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all your works. O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone we bring to remembrance.

They are dead, they will not live, they are shades, they will not arise. To that end you have visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them. But you have increased the nation, O Lord.

You have increased the nation. You are glorified. You have enlarged all the borders of the land.

O Lord, in distress they sought you. They poured out a whispered prayer when your discipline was upon them. Like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth, so were we because of you, O Lord.

We were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind. We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth, and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen. Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise.

You who dwell in the dust awake and sing for joy, for your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Come, my people, enter your chambers and shut your doors behind you. Hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by, for behold the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover it slain.

As our chapter 26 continues the declaration of the Lord's eschatological judgement and renewal that runs from chapter 24 to chapter 27, once again there is the punctuation of statements of the Lord's great deeds with expressions of praise. Almost the entirety of this chapter is responsive in character, beginning with a psalm in verses 1-6 and continuing with a psalm in verses 7-18 or 19, addressing the people in their current situation. The chapter concludes with the assurance that the Lord will act in his people's cause.

These chapters contrast two cities, likely best understood as essentially the city of man and the city of God. The city of God or Zion was described as a place of festivity and security in the preceding chapter. That chapter described a great banquet of wine being prepared for the peoples there, and of the Lord's hand resting upon his mountain.

Here the city's strength is identified with the Lord's deliverance that surrounds it, like walls or ramparts. The gates of the city are opened in order that the righteous might enter. We might here think of faithful pilgrims ascending to Mount Zion for a feast.

Entrance to the city is a mark of the Lord's approbation and acceptance of his people. The righteous person within this city, the one who trusts in the strength of the walls of the Lord's salvation that surrounds it, will know assurance of true security, freed from the fears that afflict those without. The Lord's enduring might and steadfast faithfulness is comparable to a rock.

He gives his people unwavering grounds upon which to trust him. Drawing our minds back to the preceding chapter, the song concludes by speaking of the fate of the rival city, the city of man. That city, for all of its pride, has been utterly humbled and brought low.

It is trampled underfoot by the poor and needy, those who were once oppressed within it and by it. The strength, security and hope of the righteous rests entirely in the Lord. The verses that follow describe the dependence and the confidence that arises from this.

Continuing to speak of people's steps, mentioned at the end of the song in verse 6, the prophet describes the path of the righteous in a way that characterises the path they choose as level, but also reveals that it is the Lord who makes it so. The level character of the path of the righteous likely refers to its moral integrity, but also to its safety, two related features. Verse 8 implies that the levelness of the path corresponds to the judgements of the Lord that are upright, straight and certain.

The judgements here likely refer chiefly to the Lord's judgements upon sin, not merely to his laws. In walking this path, the righteous confidently wait for the Lord and his judgements for their sake. The righteous man desires the Lord himself above all other things, seeking the honour of the Lord's name, an honour that will be manifested in his great deeds of salvation and judgement before the nations.

Where laws are well enforced and wickedness is speedily judged, evil persons are corrected and some repent, while the righteous are emboldened. The delay of the Lord's judgement is a complaint of the psalmist at various points and also of Job. Righteousness can be learnt through the judgements of the Lord in the land.

Where punishment is delayed out of divine grace, granting the wicked time to repent, the wicked can actually often be hardened and made more brazen in their sins, fancying themselves immune to the Lord's justice. The prophet perceives the judgements of the Lord in the earth, but he is dismayed to see that the wicked do not, leaving them complacent in their sin. He prays that the Lord would manifest his zeal for his people in their salvation, so that the wicked would realise the futility and shamefulness of their own ways.

He prays that the Lord would consume the wicked in his judgement. The Lord's purposes for his people are consistent and good. He seeks their peace.

Indeed, all of the good that the Lord's people have ever achieved has been through the Lord's purpose and power. They were formerly under the dominion of foreign rulers, yet the Lord had consistently rescued his people from their clutches. Only the Lord's throne endures, while his adversaries and those who once persecuted his people have been brought down to the grave, their pride condemned to the pit, erased from human memory.

Nevertheless, the Lord's people have increased and prospered, even despite such cruel oppression. Though all seemed lost on several occasions, and enemies seemed mighty beyond any hope of defeat, the light of the Lord's people was never extinguished. The next verse, verse 16, is difficult to translate and interpret.

Perhaps its sense is that the trials of Israel's history drove them to the Lord, and as the Lord came to seek his face. This is a dynamic that we witness in the book of Judges, for instance. A common image for people and nations in distress in scripture is the woman in birth pangs.

The struggle of the woman attempting to give birth is a governing metaphor in the story of the Exodus, for instance, where the story begins with Israel in birth pangs, seen in the pain of the Hebrew women who are robbed of their newborn sons, and in the courageous resistance to Pharaoh of the Hebrew midwives. That story reaches its climax as Israel is drawn out from the womb of Egypt through a narrow passage in the context of a focus on the firstborn and the opening of the womb. Yet the experience of Israel's history has often felt like recurring pangs without any birth.

One can imagine, for instance, the experience of Isaiah's own lifetime, the experience of two deliverances from the point of the nation being overthrown, the first during the Syro-Ephraimite war in the 730s BC, and the second Jerusalem's deliverance from the Assyrian invasion in 701 BC. Both of these experiences had been horrific and had involved an immense loss of life. But what had Israel achieved through them? Assyria was still in power in the region, Judah was still weak and suffering and persecuted, and there had been no great revival of the people.

The prophet has been awaiting and has prophesied a miraculous national rebirth and renewal, and with each increase of pangs he likely hoped that the time for it had come. But it didn't materialise. Commentators differ over who is the speaker in verse 19.

It seems most likely to me that the speaker is the Lord himself, answering the disheartened prophet. The Lord would one day raise his people to life. The previous chapter described the defeat of death, and here we have an image of resurrection.

Those now in the grave would be lifted up and would sing with joy. There would be a national resurrection, much as the one described in Ezekiel chapter 37 in the vision of the valley of dry bones. We could see such a national resurrection in the metaphorical raising of Israel from the grave of exile.

We might also relate this to King Hezekiah himself, who was on the brink of death but was healed by the Lord. However, this passage does not merely deal with metaphor. It anticipates the final defeat of death and the awakening of the dead to new life.

The earth is related to the womb on several occasions in scripture, and here we are told that the earth would give birth to the dead. The tomb would no longer be barren, but would be like an opened womb, with new life proceeding out from it. Nevertheless, in the meantime, prior to that final deliverance and resurrection, the Lord's people will have to shelter themselves from the Lord's wrath and that of their enemies.

We might recall the account of the Passover here, where the people did not leave their houses while the Lord judged Egypt and killed their firstborn. The sin of Egypt was exposed in that judgment, their sin in killing the children of the Lord's firstborn, Israel. Much as the blood of the baby boys thrown into the Nile called out for the Lord's vengeance, so the blood of the slain upon the earth in Isaiah's day would be disclosed and the Lord would act against the wicked.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways that the confidence of final resurrection can help us in the midst of crisis? Luke chapter 1 verses 24-56 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she kept herself hidden, saying, Thus the Lord has done for me in the days when he looked on me, to take away my reproach among people. In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you. But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

And Mary said to the angel, How will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month

with her who was called barren, for nothing will be impossible with God.

And Mary said, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah.

And she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. And Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned to her home.

For the second time in Luke chapter 1, the angel Gabriel appears to someone declaring the birth of a child. He has already appeared to Zechariah in the temple to announce the birth of John. The angel Gabriel is known to us already from Daniel chapter 8 verse 16 and 9 verse 21, where he declares the fates of nations and empires.

John is going to be the prophet like Samuel, and Jesus is going to be the Davidic king. In verse 76, John is declared to be the prophet of the most high, and here Jesus is described as the son of the most high. We've already seen parallels between the two annunciations.

The angel Gabriel appears to both of them. Both of them respond in fear. Both of them are reassured, told not to be afraid, and are told that they will have a son.

John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, and the Holy Spirit will come upon Mary. The future missions of both are described in detail, and what they will

do. Both Zechariah and Mary respond with seemingly similar questions.

How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years. And then in the case of Mary, how will this be since I am a virgin? Although it is not explicitly mentioned here, as it is in the Gospel of Matthew, Isaiah chapter 7 verses 10 to 17 is lurking behind the text in the reference to the virgin here. Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, ask a sign of the Lord your God.

Let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. And he said, Hear then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. He shall eat curds and honey, when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.

The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah, the king of Assyria. The foretold birth of the child to the young woman, or in some translations the virgin, in Isaiah chapter 7 is a portentous sign to the king of Judah. It's a sign of God bringing about a reversal in history in a short period of time.

And here there's something more going on. It's a sign of new creation. God is starting something new in history.

This is not just another descendant of Adam. A new humanity is being formed in Mary's womb. This child will be the son of the Most High.

Now this looks back to 2 Samuel chapter 7 verses 12 14 and the covenant with David. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you who shall come from your body and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

I will be to him a father and he shall be to me a son. But there is something more going on here. The expression son of God functions in a stronger sense here.

Jesus is not just going to be the Davidic king. He will also be called holy, the son of God, because of the manner of his birth. His birth is not of man, not of a human father, but of God himself.

And so his sonship seems to be referring not solely to his status as the Davidic king, but as one who has come from God himself. Here it is important that Mary is betrothed to a man of the house of David, to Joseph. It's through Joseph that Christ's royal heritage comes.

And the place of Joseph within the story is not so foregrounded within the book of Luke as it is in Matthew. But Joseph's place should not be forgotten here. Both Mary and Joseph have crucial parts to play.

It is very important for those of us who are Gentile Christians, who are accustomed to dulling ourselves to the political themes of the to see just how charged the annunciation of Christ's birth and the songs and the prophecies that follow are with references to kingship, with references to David, with references to the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham and God's blessing and visiting his people Israel. Jesus will be the Davidic king. He will be the deliverer of his people.

His birth comes in a charged with the expectation of Israel in the context of Zachariah and Elizabeth, in the context of Mary and her Magnificat, in the context of Simeon and Anna, who are praying for the deliverance of Israel. If reading the beginning of Luke's gospel we start to feel some sense of discomfort about our spiritualized version of the Messiah and the way in which we've detached the Messiah from political themes and kingdom themes, then that's good. That's exactly as it should be because those themes are an important part of this story and we need to be careful not to erase them.

The Spirit will overshadow Mary just as it hovered over the waters of creation and how it covered the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 40. It's power from on high and this is also something that anticipates Pentecost. Many have spoken about this as a Marian Pentecost and I think that's exactly right.

There is a connection between the conception of Christ in the womb of Mary and the way in which the Spirit comes upon the church at Pentecost so that Christ is formed in his people. Perhaps we are supposed to hear themes of the reversal of the fall in the reference to the blessed fruit of Mary's womb. The womb once mediated judgment to the woman in Genesis chapter 3:15 and now it becomes the means of blessing in the same way the tomb was the great sign of the judgment upon Adam and now at the end of the Gospel of Luke we'll see the tomb opened up as a new womb and Christ coming forth as the firstborn of the dead.

The fruit of the garden which led to condemnation is replaced by the fruit of Mary's womb who brings salvation. Jesus is the seed of the woman and the woman in particular as Mary is a virgin. This is not the seed of a woman who has had relations with a man.

It's the seed of the woman in particular and he's the first of a new humanity to replace that of Adam. The description of the Spirit coming upon and overshadowing suggests the creation of a new tabernacle or temple. Mary, her womb and her child are spoken of using temple imagery and like Acts, Luke begins then with the establishment of a new temple.

It's a sign of things changing. Nothing will be impossible with God recalls the angel's

words to Sarah in Genesis chapter 18 verse 14. Mary is told that Elizabeth her relative has also had a miraculous conception.

Their stories are interwoven and the mothers of these two sons who will together deliver God's people are brought together at this point. This would serve as an assurance to Mary but also a sign to them both. Elizabeth also as a respected woman could vouch for Mary that she was a woman of good character and that this was not a child born of unfaithfulness.

She herself was given a sign of that as her infant leaped in her womb. Having asked the question of how those things would be, not as a question of unbelief as in the case of Zechariah but as a question of belief, Mary then speaks of herself later as the servant of the Lord. She submits to the Lord readily accepting the vocation that's laid upon her.

When she visits Elizabeth, John the Baptist leaps in the womb of Elizabeth for joy. King David leapt and danced before the Ark of the Covenant as it was brought into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel chapter 6 verses 14 to 16 in the garments of a child. As Mary, the new Ark bearing God's presence, comes to Elizabeth, the infant forerunner John dances before Jesus, God's presence, just as David danced before the Ark bringing the presence of the Lord into Jerusalem.

Elizabeth speaks of Mary as the mother of her Lord and the leaping of her baby is taken as a sign of the superiority of the one over the other. The language, my Lord, is a very powerful testimony to the importance of the child that Mary is bearing and again would be a sign to Mary and assurance to her. Mary is blessed in much the same way as Jael is in Judges chapter 5 verse 24.

Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. Jael was famous for crushing the head of Sisera and Mary and her child will be involved in crushing the head of the serpent. Mary's song, as we shall see, is also like Hannah's from 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 to 10.

What we're seeing here is that Mary is cut from the same cloth as the great heroines of the Old Testament. In Mary we have a charged condensation of much of the imagery and symbolism associated with women in the Old Testament of the great women of the Old Testament. Their characteristics meet in her and she is someone who stands for the woman that's spoken of in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 and the promise of victory over the serpent.

Many Protestants get nervous about this. They get concerned that we don't have too high a view of Mary but yet scripture has a high view of Mary. She is someone in which the destiny of God's people comes to a head.

She is someone who is an archetype and an exemplar of the church and the people of

faith. Nevertheless, contrary to the way that Mary is often treated in Roman Catholic circles, this doesn't require exalting Mary above the ranks of mere mortals and treating her as if she was somewhere between God and humanity. Rather she is like other characters in scripture, characters like Abraham or Sarah or Rebecca or Rachel.

She is a character who stands for a lot more than just an individual. There is a confluence of destinies within her so that past stories reach their climax in her actions and later realities and persons can trace the origins back to her. She is not unique in this respect.

While the church can appropriately see her as a mother figure that represents the church itself and Israel itself, Sarah is also presented in a similar way, as is Rachel. And in the case of men, Abraham is the one that sums up the history of Israel in himself, playing it out in advance. Abraham is described as the father of us all.

We greatly underplay characters like Mary or Abraham if we just see them as individuals who manifest faith and are exemplars of faith. Yet their status is greatly overstated when there is the development of certain forms of devotion to them, forms of devotion that collapse the greater realities that are at work in and manifested in those characters into a single individual. Mary is one of a number of symbols of the church and of Israel, and the meaning of these greater realities is neither exhausted by or fully realised in her.

Mary stays with Elizabeth from the sixth to the ninth months of her pregnancy. Darkness was over the land from the sixth to the ninth hours in Luke 23 verse 44. Is there a connection? Perhaps.

One of them seems to harken back to the ninth plague which preceded the death of the firstborn, and this is something that might look forward to the birth of the firstborn. But I wouldn't put much weight on it. One of the first things that readers of Mary's song notice is its similarity with the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verses 1 to 10.

And Hannah prayed and said, My heart exalts in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord, my mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy like the Lord, for there is none besides you. There is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly. Let not arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.

Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has born seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life.

He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich. He brings low and he exalts.

He raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness. For not by might shall a man prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces.

Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.

This prayer is alluded to in Psalm 113 verses 7 to 9. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord.

This is the first of the cycle of the Psalms sung at the Passover, and hearing it in the background here we might recognise a new Exodus-style deliverance in the making. Mary's Magnificat expands its focus from the Lord's attention to her particular situation to his attention to that of Israel as a whole. As in the prayer of Hannah, we here can see that God's attention to this young woman called Mary is his attention to the entire people.

His answer to her prayers is his answer to the prayers of his people. God's deliverance of his people Israel does not come with dramatic fanfare. It comes, as in the case of 1 Samuel, in response to a humble woman's prayers.

God's kingdom is one that comes like no earthly kingdom. It comes not to the great and powerful of the earth first, but to the meek and lowly. It comes not in the thunder of chariots and the snorting of their horses, but in the secrecy of a virgin's womb.

Mary's Magnificat ends with a reference to God's promises to Abraham, and we've seen a number of allusions to Abraham within this chapter, and these are not the last of the allusions to Abraham that come. The descriptions of Zachariah and Elizabeth recall Sarah and Abraham in their old age. The annunciations of the birth of Jesus and of John the Baptist recall the annunciations of the birth of Ishmael and of Isaac, and the response of Zachariah recalls the response of Abraham and Sarah.

If Jesus comes as the son of David, he also comes as the great son of Abraham, the one who is the greater Isaac, the beloved son that will later lay down his life in obedience to his father. A question to consider, thinking of the other places in biblical narrative where we have songs or great poems of the type that we see in Mary's Magnificat, what might be the significance of its presence at this point?