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November 21st: Isaiah 34 & Luke 5:1-16

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The devastation of Edom. Jesus calls his disciples.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 34. Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples. Let the earth hear, and all that fills it, the world and all that comes from it.

For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host. He has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise.

The mountains shall flow with their blood. All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.

For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens. Behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction. The Lord has a sword.

It is sated with blood. It is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozra, a great slaughter in the land of Edom.

Wild oxen shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat. For the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur. Her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched.

Its smoke shall go up for ever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste. None shall pass through it for ever and ever.

But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it. The owl and the raven shall dwell in it. He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plumb line of emptiness.

Its nobles, there is no one there to call it a kingdom, and all its princes shall be nothing. Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches.

And wild animals shall meet with hyenas. The wild goat shall cry to his fellow. Indeed there the nightbird settles and finds for herself a resting place.

There the owl nests and lays in hatches, and gathers her young in her shadow. Indeed there the hawks are gathered, each one with her mate. Seek and read from the book of the Lord.

Not one of these shall be missing. None shall be without her mate. For the mouth of the Lord has commanded, and his spirit has gathered them.

He has cast the lot for them. His hand has portioned it out to them with the line. They shall possess it for ever.

From generation to generation they shall dwell in it. The oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah chapters 13-23 were followed by a more general statement of judgment upon the whole earth and prophecies of redemption in chapters 24-27. Many commentators see chapters 34 and 35 as serving a similar function for the oracles that especially focused upon Judah and Jerusalem in chapters 28-33.

The attention given to Moab in chapters 24-27, Edward Young notes, might be compared to the way that Edom is singled out in chapters 34 and 35. Moab is the representative nation in the first general eschatological prophecies, and Edom functions in a similar capacity here. These chapters describe the comprehensive breadth of the Lord's judgment.

We might, Christopher Slight's remarks, observe the similarities between the opening of chapter 34 and Isaiah chapter 24 verses 1-6. 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 place of chapters 34 and 35 within the wider text of Isaiah has been a matter of debate.

Parallels with the language of Jeremiah have led some to argue that these chapters come from a later date and are dependent upon Jeremiah, although one could readily counter by arguing that the dependence could run in the opposite direction. Charles Torrey argued that these two chapters form an introduction to the second half of the book, more typically identified as chapters 40-66, regarded by most commentators as coming from a later hand, although more conservative commentators typically strongly dispute this assessment. Gary Smith highlights the parallels that Jacques Vermeulen and Hugh Williamson observed between chapters 13 and 34, which Williamson lays out as follows.

a. Preparation for War, chapter 13 verses 2-4, chapter 34 verse 1. b. Killing of the Nations, chapter 13 verses 5-9 and 14-16, and chapter 34 verses 2-3. c. Cosmic Upheaval, chapter 13 verses 10-13, chapter 34 verses 4-5a. d. Capture of the City, 13 verses 17-19 and 34 verses 5b-8.

e. Land becomes a Desert, chapter 13 verse 20 and chapter 34 verses 9-10. f. Wild Animals Live There, chapter 13 verses 21 and 22, chapter 34 verses 11-15. These parallels would serve to bracket the larger section of chapters 13-35, which contain all of the oracles against the Nations and the oracles against Judah.

The narrative material concerning the 701 BC Assyrian crisis that follows might be related to the material concerning the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war that precedes the section. The Great Isaiah Scroll, one of the best preserved of the Dead Sea Scrolls, likely dating from the 2nd century BC, has a break in its text between chapters 33 and 34. William Brownlee made the intriguing case that chapters 1-33 and 34-66 represent two paralleled panels of the book.

Chapters 7-8, the material concerning Isaiah's address to King Ahaz during the crisis of the Syro-Ephraimite war, most obviously parallels with chapters 36-39, which relates Isaiah's address to King Hezekiah in the years around the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, but Brownlee argued for an even more extensive mapping of one half onto the next.

Brownlee's thesis involved the doubtful speculation that the text of Isaiah that the Qumran scribe originally employed only contained the first 33 chapters and that he had used a different text of Isaiah to complete the book. That larger text of Isaiah was, according to Brownlee, one whose latter half was produced not by Isaiah himself, but by a later Isaac school.

The similarities of language between chapters 34 and 35 and later chapters, along with possible structural relations, are worth considering. While we might discard some of the more speculative arguments for the text belonging to some later hand, we should appreciate the ways in which these chapters can both look forward and look backward within the text of Isaiah, and in the process recognise something more of the overarching unity and structure of the book. The opening verses of the chapter summon all of the nations to attention, much as the opening verses of chapter 24 did.

The judgement, as there, is described in comprehensive and cosmic terms. In the Lord's anger he sentences the nations to destruction. They would suffer an ignominious death.

The bodies of their unburied slain, exposed and rotting, would fill the air with their putrefying stench. The mountains would flow with their blood, both land and air polluted by their death. Chapter 13 used cosmic imagery in describing the downfall of Babylon.

In verse 10, for instance, For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light, the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. And in verse 13, Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. Here again the prophet uses such imagery, speaking of the heavens rotting away, the skies being rolled up, and the host of the stars falling like leaves from a tree.

Revelation chapter 6 verses 12 to 14 employs imagery that is likely dependent upon verse 4 of our chapter. When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

The host of heaven would refer to the gods and rulers of the nations, whose power and thrones would be brought low. To the surprise of many readers and commentators, the Lord now turns to address Edom more particularly. This, as we have noted, is comparable to the way that Moab is singled out in chapter 25, in the more general eschatological section that follows the oracles against the nations in chapters 13 to 23.

Some ingenious yet unpersuasive theories have been advanced to explain its position here, for instance the idea that Edom ought to be interpreted as man, a theory which Jung attributes to Edward Cossain. The reference to Edom here is also an argument used

against those who want to claim that all the material in the book of Isaiah comes from the hand of the prophet himself. Edom, they argue, is clearly a focus of prophetic condemnation and declarations of judgment following their participation in the destruction and plundering of Jerusalem in 586 BC, when the city fell to Babylon.

Were this passage, they maintain, dated to the historical period around 701 BC, its material would be quite incongruous with the actual situation. We might note that Edom is excluded from the earlier material against the nations in chapters 13 to 23. John Oswald suggests that such explanations for the singling out of Edom here are quite unnecessary, as its inclusion is readily understood on other grounds.

First, Edom, on account of its association with Esau, was Israel's apostate and rejected twin, and the most fitting contrast to it. Second, they had long been opponents to Judah. Formerly under the reign of Judah, they had broken free from Judah over a century earlier, during the reign of Jehoram.

During the reign of Amaziah, earlier in the 8th century, Judah had fought against the Edomites, defeating them, but then Amaziah set up the gods of Edom as his own gods and was judged. Amos, whose ministry overlapped with the time of the beginning of Isaiah's own, had prophesied against Edom too. Earlier in Isaiah's own ministry, during the reign of Ahaz, the Edomites had defeated Judah in battle, described in 2 Chronicles 28 16-17.

At that time, King Ahaz sent the king of Assyria for help, for the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives. Most importantly, the singling out of Edom here, like the singling out of Moab earlier, is not on account of Edom being the most threatening or prominent opposing nation, but is representative and typical. In chapter 24 verse 21, the Lord spoke of punishing the host of heaven, presumably referring to the false gods of the nations.

The sword of the Lord drinking its fill in the heavens, described in verse 5, probably refers to such a judgment upon the demonic powers. Having been victorious in the heavens, the Lord's sword descends upon the nations of the earth, focusing upon Edom in particular, here described as the people devoted to destruction. The destruction of Edom is described as if it were some sort of sacrifice.

The Lord's sword is preparing animals and peoples for a great sacrifice in the Edomite city of Bozra, also mentioned in chapter 63. Within the sacrificial system, animals represented people, and the animals described here likely represent various classes of persons in the land of Edom. Much as the hyperbolic language of mountains flowing with blood was used in verse 3, so the land surrounding the great sacrifice of Edom would be like the land surrounding an altar, drinking up the blood that is poured out upon it.

This would be a day of vengeance and a year of recompense, an appointed time of

divine justice and judgment, within which the Lord would deliver his people and act against all of their foes. The rest of the chapter describes what will happen to the people devoted to destruction that Edom represents. Their streams would be turned into pitch and their soil into sulfur, rendering their land a devastated and impassable wasteland.

We might here recall the judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, upon whom the Lord cast down fiery destruction. After the Lord prepared the altar and its sacrifice, the land of Edom would become an enduring conflagration, its flames and smoke unquenched, ascending like an unceasing testament to the Lord's just judgment upon his enemies. Uzziah describes the removal of its rulers, the overgrown ruins of its former habitations, and the wild beasts and birds that would dwell in its condemned strongholds and fortresses.

We should immediately recognize the similarities between these descriptions and those of Babylon in chapter 13 verses 20 to 22. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations. No Arab will pitch his tent there.

No shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures. Their ostriches will dwell, and their wild goats will dance.

Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces. Its time is close at hand, and its days will not be prolonged. These similarities strengthen the case for a relationship between chapters 34 and 5 and chapter 13, bracketing the larger body of material between them.

Oswald suggests that, while we might see Babylon as the distant example of doomed human pride, Edom is the much nearer one, Judah's closest neighbor. The longer list of the desert and wild animals here is one potentially surprising feature of the prophecy. In verses 16 and 17, the prophet seems to declare that the destiny of the people devoted to destruction has been thoroughly and comprehensively determined, down to the specific breeds of birds and animals that will dwell in their ruins, and the fact that they would have mates.

The sentence, down to the smallest detail, has already been decreed, and it is certain that it will be enacted upon them at the divinely appointed time. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we see the juxtaposition of Israel and Edom? Luke chapter 5 verses 1 to 16. On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.

Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land, and he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a

catch. And Simon answered, Master, we toiled all night and took nothing, but at your word I will let down the nets.

And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.

For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken. And so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, Do not be afraid.

From now on you will be catching men. And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy.

And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, Lord, if you will, you can make me clean. And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I will, be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him.

And he charged him to tell no one, but go and show yourself to the priest and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them. But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Jesus begins Luke chapter 5 by teaching by the side of Lake Gennesaret. He goes into a boat and teaches from just off the shore. Within the book of Luke, it is always the lake of Gennesaret.

In the other Gospels we read about the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias, whereas it tends to be lake throughout the Gospel of Luke. Why the difference? In Mark, for instance, a great deal is made of the sea stories, the way in which Christ proves his power on the seas and demonstrates his glory to his disciples. In Luke, however, there is a sea, but the sea is found in the second volume of his work, in the book of Acts.

I think it's likely that Luke refers to the Sea of Galilee as the Lake of Gennesaret to hold some of that energy back until the book of Acts, where we will reach the sea, as Paul finally goes to Rome. This is because the sea is associated with the Gentiles. In the Old Testament there aren't many stories of the sea at all.

We have stories of the land, of shepherds and sheep. There are only really two boat stories. The first, of course, is the story of the ark and Noah, and the second is the story of Jonah and the big fish.

Both of these stories involve a more cosmic frame. In Noah it's the whole world that's being judged, and in the case of Jonah he's sent to a Gentile people with a message from God. The boat is Simon's, and the boat is moved out a bit from the land, and Jesus teaches from it.

After the end of his teaching he instructs Simon to put out into the deep and let down his nets for a catch. And he catches such a great multitude of fish that the net almost breaks. He needs to be assisted by people in other boats, but the number of fish is so great that the boats themselves are almost sinking.

Simon has others with him, but the narrative throughout is closely focused upon him as an individual. Simon Peter, it's the first time in the Gospel that he's called Peter, is aware that he has been part of a miracle. Jesus is no ordinary man.

Simon is instantly, acutely aware of his own sinfulness. He's responding to a theophanic event, an event in which the glory of God is displayed in physical manifestations. The power and the holiness of God reveal our own sinfulness by contrast.

Many see doctrines that highlight human sinfulness as arising from a pessimistic view of man, and what they fail to see is that more often than not they find that origin in a glorious vision of God. It's as we see God's holiness that we truly perceive our own sinfulness. The dazzling radiance of the Lord's glory reveals the grubby, grimy and ugly pollution of human sinfulness.

What's taking place here is reminiscent of the commissioning of the Prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah sees the glorious vision of the Lord in the temple, his response is, Woe is me for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. It's Isaiah chapter 6 verse 5, and that response to a theophany is the same sort of thing that Peter is having here.

The response of God in that instant is to send a seraphim with a coal from the altar. He touches the mouth of Isaiah and says, Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. And there is an implicit forgiving of Simon's sin here.

He's aware of his sin and Christ tells him not to be afraid. His sin is forgiven, his guilt is not held against him, and he is going to be, like Isaiah, commissioned with a task to Israel. He is told that he will be a fisher of men.

The Gentiles, as dwellers in the sea, could be thought of as fish. Also, it's a way of thinking about those who are exiled, those who have been driven out of the land. Jeremiah chapter 16 verses 15 to 16 is a previous use of the language of fishers in relationship to gathering human beings.

For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill and out of the clefts of the rock.

God is going to gather his people, and one of the means by which he's going to do that is sending fishermen after them. Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 19 to 21. In that passage, Elisha is engaged in a symbolically important task, and in a similar way, Simon's task and the miracle that is performed is a manifestation of his later calling.

1 Kings chapter 19. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him.

And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you. And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

James and John are there with Peter. These are the three core disciples. They are companions in their former profession, and their former profession prefigures their spiritual calling.

Simon has been told to put out into the deep, to leave the land. Simon will lead later on the boat of the church. The church is like a boat, it's part of the land that has gone out to sea.

It's a sign of his future mission. He will strike out from the land. He will go to a sea town, to Joppa.

As Jonah went to Joppa before heading out to Tarshish, so Peter will be in Joppa where he receives this mission to go to Cornelius and to go to the Gentiles. And as the Gentiles are brought the gospel of Christ, they will be gathered in. Peter will fulfill his calling as the fisher of the one who leads the church in this primary mission, going out into the deep, leaving the land behind.

He will pioneer that, and just as in this occasion he is assisted by his friends James and John and his companions and colleagues, they are going to be there assisting him there too. We should also note the way that this sign is repeated in John chapter 21, when Peter is restored to his calling. Jesus' statement to Simon that from that point on he will be catching men goes to him in particular, but clearly it includes James and John and presumably also Andrew who's there with them.

After this Jesus heals a leper. Leprosy in scripture is not what we usually think of as leprosy. That is the condition called Hansen's disease.

Rather, leprosy seems to be a type of skin condition, and that skin condition could be seen in part as a judgment of God upon the person. While it certainly has that connotation in certain parts of the Old Testament though, we should not presume that it is the case every occasion where we meet it. Lepers would generally live away from larger bodies of population, so Jesus probably met the man in a more secluded location as he's going through deserted areas.

Jesus is moved by pity at the man's plight and he touches him. It's a means by which some would usually contract impurity, but when Jesus does this he communicates wholeness. This healing doesn't merely deliver the leper from a physical ailment, but also delivers him from social isolation.

He can now become part of the wider people again. Jesus instructs him not to say anything and then sends him away. He must present himself to the priest and go through the prescribed process of cleansing.

Jesus is immune from catching impurity, but the man must still observe the proper procedure, and this is a proof to the authorities. Perhaps there's some connotation of judgment there. However, although Jesus instructs the man not to tell anyone, the story seems to be told and his fame spreads throughout the region.

As a result, it's difficult for Jesus to do his work openly in towns anymore. Rather, he has to go into desolate places, and in these desolate places he spends time in prayer. While we might think of the desolate places as places of communion with nature, of seeing the beauty of God's creation, and of enjoying solitude and communion with God, we should bear in mind the many times in which in the New and the Old Testament the wilderness is a place of demonic habitation.

Christ may be going to the front line as it were, going to the place where the demons dwell, and engaging in the struggle of prayer. A question to consider. How might the story of Simon and his encounter with Jesus in the miraculous catch of fish provide a paradigm for Christian experience more generally?