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December 17th: Isaiah 60 & Luke 18:1-30

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Arise, shine, for your light has come! The Parable of the Persistent Widow, the Parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee, and the Rich Ruler.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 60. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.

But the Lord will arise upon you, and His glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see.

They all gather together, they come to you. Your son shall come from afar, and your daughter shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant.

Your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you. The wealth of the nation shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah.

All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring

good news, the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you.

The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you. They shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastland shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because He has made you beautiful.

Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you, for in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be opened continually, day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish, those nations shall be utterly laid waste.

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plain, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age. You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall nurse at the breast of kings, and you shall know that I, the Lord, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver, instead of wood bronze, instead of stones iron.

I will make your overseers peace, and your taskmasters righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders. You shall call your walls salvation, and your gates praise.

The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light, but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified.

The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation. I am the Lord. In its time I will hasten it.

As our chapters 56 to 66, the larger division with which the book concludes, began with chapters 56 to 59, containing two loosely parallel sections in chapters 56 and 57, and chapters 58 and 59. In chapter 60 we move into the heart of this division, with messages of the Lord's redemption that will run up until the end of chapter 62. The reader of Isaiah

will not infrequently encounter passages that allude back to previous ones, inviting them to re-read older texts in the light of newer ones.

For instance, chapter 60 seems to offer several points of comparison with Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1 to 4. The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. However, in recognizing the similarities between the texts, we can also recognize some differences, throwing certain aspects of the text into a greater relief. John Goldingay observes the fact that, while chapter 2 focuses upon the significance of the elevation of Zion for the nations, in chapter 60 the accent is more upon the significance of the coming of the nations for the city itself.

He writes, In Isaiah chapter 2 the nations come for instruction and conflict resolution. In Isaiah 60 they come to contribute to the city's wealth and worship. In Isaiah chapter 2 they come freely and with the head held high.

In Isaiah chapter 60 they come bending low, as in Isaiah chapter 49. The chapter begins with a charge to Zion to arise and shine, as the glorious dawn of the Lord's salvation rises over them. As the rising radiance of the Lord's glory sends forth its beams, bathed in its dazzling splendor, they are to reflect its light to the whole world that is sunk in darkness.

In the previous chapter Jacob was described in the darkness of its sins, in verses 9 and 10. Now, however, they are to become light-bearers in the world in dark days, with the glory of the Lord's light shining forth from them, attracting nations and kings like moths to a lamp. A city once robbed of its children is now instructed to look all around, as, from every direction, their children return to it.

This should remind us of the earlier account of the children's return, in chapter 49, verses 18 to 23. As I live, declares the Lord, you shall put them all on as an ornament, you shall bind them on as a bride does. Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land, surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away.

The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears, the place is too narrow for

me, make room for me to dwell in. Then you will say in your heart, who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold I was left alone, from where have these come? Thus says the Lord God, behold I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples, and they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. Kings shall be your foster-fathers, and their queens your nursing-mothers.

With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord, those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. As the nations come to Zion, they are returning her lost children with them.

They are also bringing tribute with them, kingly gifts for Jerusalem and her temple. Great caravans of camels from eastern lands will crowd the Judean hillsides, laden with precious treasures and animals for sacrifice, all of which will be accepted by the Lord as a token of his acceptance of them. At the height of the kingdom under Solomon, the Queen of Sheba had come from afar to see the glories of Israel and Jerusalem.

First Kings chapter 10 verse 2 describes this as follows. She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold and precious stones. Once again visitors from afar would travel to the land with their riches, further to glorify the now glorious city.

In Genesis chapter 2 the Garden of Eden was like the heart of the world, with rivers going out to other lands, many of which contained precious metals and stones. The implied intent was that humanity would go out into the world from the Garden, and then bring the riches of the world back into the Garden sanctuary, in order to beautify it. During the reign of Solomon, Jerusalem became such a place to which the nations assembled with their treasures.

Israel became a rich trading nation, with a fleet of ships of Tarshish going out to distant shores to bring back wealth. Once again we read in First Kings chapter 10 verses 22 to 25. The restored Zion as described in Isaiah chapter 60 would remind the people of the great heights reached by the United Kingdom prior to Solomon's fall and the kingdom's division.

A glorious past that seemed lost and beyond recovery would be restored, but not just restored, brought to a height that would exceed anything seen even in Solomon's days, all through the gracious work of the Lord. Many Christians have seen in the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus were their gifts, a fulfillment in miniature of this great and glorious promise, and in part as a result of this, have presented them as kings riding on camels. Jerusalem had once been battered by the armies of foreign nations, its walls breached and broken down.

Now foreigners would come to build up the broken walls. As the foreign nations had been

the instrument of the Lord's wrath upon his people in the past, now they would be the means of his restoration of them. The gates of the city, typically closed at night to protect it from attack, would now never be closed.

As the city was so secure, indeed there would be such a constant and unceasing stream of pilgrims from the nations that the gates would be left open continually. Any nation that might come against them as an enemy would be destroyed in the Lord's wrath and judgment. In the days of Solomon, great trees of Lebanon were sent to Jerusalem to build a temple and other great palaces and buildings of the king.

Whereas the earlier prophecies of Isaiah frequently spoke of the felling of great forests and the devastation of Lebanon's mighty cedars, now the heart of Jerusalem would become a place of great trees once more, a glorious forest of the Lord's planting. The children of their former adversaries would now come to pay tribute to them and to submit to their rule, recognizing that the Lord was in their midst as the mighty king of Zion. The desolate and despised city would now be the delight of the nations, a glorious jewel of the Lord set in the earth, attracting the wonder of people far and near.

Once again, themes of earlier chapters reappear here. Chapter 49 verses 22 and 23. Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples, and they shall bear your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.

Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame. The mighty kings of foreign nations would be like wet nurses for the restored nation, a sign of how the Lord had exalted his people. Already in the Lord's use of the great Cyrus and later kings of Persia to provide for the restoration of the temple and the city, we see some fulfillment of these promises.

After the splendor of Solomon's reign, a time when gold and silver were plentiful in the land, the sins of the nation and its kings led to its riches being plundered, especially by Shishak, king of Egypt, during the reign of King Rehoboam. Shishak had taken off the treasures of the king's house and the shields of gold that Solomon had made. King Rehoboam had replaced these with shields of bronze, a sign of the much diminished glory of the nation.

In verse 17 the Lord promises his people that this loss of glory would be most markedly reversed and all of its building materials would be substituted for more costlier and glorious ones. Whereas many of their leaders in the past, even some of the greatest of them, had been harsh and oppressive overlords, now peace and righteousness would be the ones ruling over them. The violence and destruction that had formerly ravaged their

land would be banished from its borders and the city would be surrounded with walls called Salvation and Praise.

Perhaps we could draw some parallel between this and Zachariah's description of a Jerusalem inhabited without walls. The chapter opened with the promise of the advent of the light of the Lord's glory and salvation. Now the people are assured that this brilliant light would never fail or set in the sky, but would continue day and night, holding back all threats of the darkness, the light being nothing less than the Lord's own glory.

Perhaps we ought to consider connections between this and the pillar of fire that lit up the nights for Israel in the wilderness, but in a much more glorious and enduring form. As the city is transformed, so will be its people. They would be righteous, vindicated by the Lord, in right relationship with him and walking in uprightness before him.

The precarious purchase that the people had once had upon the promised land would now be replaced by a confident and secure possession of it, planted firmly within it by the Lord. This would all serve to glorify the Lord himself, the great assurance for Israel that, even despite its sin and unworthiness, the Lord would accomplish their salvation. Israel would be fruitful and multiply, so much so that each of Abraham's children would enjoy the blessing given to their forefather, even the least of them being made into a great nation.

This glorious future is guaranteed to the people by the Lord's own commitment, grounded in his unique identity as God alone. A question to consider, what points of resemblance can you see between this prophecy and John's vision of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation? Luke chapter 18 verses 1-30 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.

And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary. For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming. And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says, and will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector standing far off

would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Now they were bringing even infants to him so that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

But Jesus called them to him, saying, Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. And a ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

You know the commandments, Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother. And he said, All these I have kept from my youth. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, One thing you still lack.

Sell all that you have, and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.

Jesus seeing that he had become sad, said, How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard it said, And who can be saved? But he said, What is impossible with man is possible with God.

And Peter said, See, we have left our homes and followed you. And he said to them, Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life. The persistent widow at the beginning of Luke chapter 18 represents the oppressed righteous in Israel waiting for salvation.

The parable argues from the weaker to the stronger. If even an unjust judge will respond, how much more the righteous God? The woman is calling out to be avenged by the representative of the law against her adversary or oppressor. This is compared to the prayers of God's people for judgment against their oppressors.

Her faith provides a model for the people of God to follow. And such prayers for vengeance are found at various points in the Psalms, but also in such places as Revelation chapter 6 verse 10. They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Handled appropriately, it's not wrong to pray in such a manner.

As in Romans chapter 12 verse 19, we are not to avenge ourselves, but to give place to God's vengeance. And it can be helpful when we're thinking about these prayers for

vengeance to consider David's imprecatory Psalms that were written while he was fleeing from Saul. And we read those alongside 1 Samuel's description of his actions to see how not avenging ourselves and praying for God to avenge us need not conflict.

The coming of the Son of Man then is here associated with his coming to avenge his persecuted people and in part in response to their prayers. Prayer is central in both of the opening parables in this chapter. We pray as those deserving nothing from God's hand, who trust his mercy.

And the images of the people of the kingdom are striking here, a widow, a tax collector, infants, the poor. If the second half of Luke chapter 17 is concerned with the manner of the coming of the kingdom of God, the when and the where, much of the chapter that follows addresses the manner in which people will receive its blessings. In a series of parables and teachings, Jesus presents this in terms of a number of different categories.

In verses 1 to 8, vengeance. In verses 9 to 14, vindication. In verses 15 to 17, reception.

In verses 18 to 23, inheritance. And in verses 24 to 30, entrance. While it might be easy to read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector merely as a teaching concerning contrasting private relationships individuals can have with God, when we situate the parable upon the broader canvas of Jesus' teaching regarding the coming kingdom, there are further dimensions that emerge.

In particular, it underlines the fact that the actions of the various characters in this parable and the teachings that surround it, the persistent widow, the rich young ruler, the tax collector and the Pharisee, the disciples, are all oriented towards the horizon of a future and public action of God within Israel and the world's history. That day would bring both vindication and judgment. It would be a deliverance and reward for some, and exclusion and shame for others.

It would publicly reveal where everyone stood relative to God in his purposes for history. For the Pharisee, that future was awaited with a blithe assurance that he would be vindicated within it. When he looked at his life, all the signs were propitious that he was in the right.

He was a fine specimen of a true and faithful Israelite. He guarded the nation's holiness. And as a result, he was free to engage in a sort of self-congratulation under the guise of a prayer of thanksgiving.

His self-confidence was also powerfully bolstered by how favourably he appeared against the foil of others, the extortionists, the unjust, the adulterers and the tax collector. His high self-regard was inseparable from his habitual judgment of others. If the Pharisee was confident in his righteousness, the tax collector openly addressed God from a position of moral destitution and injustice.

He threw himself upon the divine mercy. Facing the prospect of God's coming just kingdom, the tax collector is well aware of where he stands relative to it. The Pharisee's self-righteous presumption of his own standing, his assumption that he was on the right side of history, one who would receive future praise and vindication, manifested a deep perversion of what it meant to relate to the Lord.

In Jesus' teaching, the kingdom of God is one in which we are all found to be on the wrong side of history. If the blessings of God's justice are to be received, they must be received as pure mercy and grace, from a position of weakness, dependence, lack and confessed injustice. As we find ourselves in such a position, justification no longer provides us with the grounds for condemning others in self-assured righteousness.

The tax collector goes home justified, because although unworthy, as he is one who appreciates his utter lack, he is able to receive the divine gift of the kingdom's fullness. To the degree that we resist perceiving ourselves as radically unjust, morally insufficient, subject to condemnation, and as willfully and extensively complicit in forms of evil, we disqualify ourselves from entry into the justice of the kingdom. The justice of the kingdom comes in the form of forgiveness, and to receive forgiveness you must acknowledge your wrong, and your insufficiency and your failure and your need to receive the kingdom as a gracious act of God in mercy towards you.

None of us stands securely on the right side of history. Rather, like the tax collector, we must reach out in humility from our moral destitution, seeking divine mercy like humble and needy beggars. After this, the disciples seek to prevent children from being brought to Jesus to be blessed, but Jesus tells them not to do so.

While the disciples presumably thought that the young children were distractions from the righteousness of men, they lacked honour and status, and they should not be given so much attention, for Jesus they were quite the opposite. They were models of the way that the kingdom is to be received. Our section of this chapter is concluded with a description of a ruler coming to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life.

Many read this passage thinking that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law, driving the man to despair of his righteousness. That's not actually how the story goes. Jesus teaches that the commandments are necessary for entering into life.

The twist is in how this is understood. He highlights the commandments that relate to our relationship with our neighbours in particular. Although he does not mention the tenth commandment, you shall not covet, that commandment will be fulfilled as the ruler sells what he has and gives to the poor.

And the commandments are kept on a deeper level still by following Christ himself. When he lists the commandments to the ruler, Jesus only lists from those

commandments that concern loving your neighbour. How is the ruler to obey the command to love God? By giving up the thing that he is most attached to, money, and following Jesus.

Jesus implicitly asks for the loyalty that belongs to God here. And we can see the parable of the unjust steward in the background. The rich ruler should sell what he has, make friends with the poor with his money, and then he will have great riches in heaven.

This exchange highlights once again the danger of riches as things that weigh us down and prevent us from serving and following our true master. This should also make us uncomfortable. We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us.

However while there is no general requirement to sell all that we have and to give to the poor, Christ does call us to that same sort of loyalty. Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom. Wealth is something that can master us.

We think that we possess wealth, but often it is our wealth that possesses us, and we should be very, very fearful. This is why Jesus gives the most incredible warnings against riches, that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. However, those who give up things for the kingdom are promised a return, not just in the age to come, but also in the present age, and we should be prepared to renounce our riches and follow Christ, to give up whatever it is that tethers our hearts to this age, to commit ourselves to the kingdom, and we will find that we are richer for it.

In laying down our lives, we will finally secure them. The disciples have shown their loyalty to Christ and their faith in Jesus by their actions. They have left everything to follow him, and they will be richly blessed both in this present time and in the age to come.

We gain much as we follow Jesus, even in this present life. The need to receive God's kingdom from a position of lack or destitution is a recurring theme within Luke 18. The widow addresses the unjust judge from a position of social powerlessness.

In receiving the kingdom as a little child, we do so as those who are weak and dependent. In light of the kingdom, the rich ruler's paradoxical lack is his abundance, something that he must surrender in order to inherit the kingdom aright. Finally, the disciples are promised a reward in the age to come as they have left houses, parents, brothers, wives, and children.

The tax collector who seeks God's mercy from a position of moral unworthiness is the true heir, rather than the Pharisee who presumes his entitlement. If the coming of the kingdom is not as people would have expected it, the receiving of it is not either. A question to consider.

Why do the righteous need to be persistent in their prayers for justice? If God is a just judge.