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December 23rd: Isaiah 66 & Luke 21:5-38

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Zion gives birth to a new nation. The Olivet Discourse.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 66. Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What is the house that you would build for me? And what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord.

But this is the one to whom I will look, he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word. He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man. He who sacrifices a lamb like one who breaks a dog's neck.

He who presents a grain offering like one who offers pig's blood. He who makes a memorial offering of frankincense like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways and their soul delights in their abominations.

I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them. Because when I called, no one answered. When I spoke, they did not listen.

But they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight. Hear the

word of the Lord, you who tremble at his word. Your brothers who hate you and cast you out for my namesake have said, Let the Lord be glorified that we may see your joy.

But it is they who shall be put to shame. The sound of an uproar from the city, a sound from the temple, the sound of the Lord rendering recompense to his enemies. Before she was in labor, she gave birth.

Before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son. Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labor, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth, says the Lord? Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb, says your God? Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her.

Rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her. That you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast. That you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.

For thus says the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream. And you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees, as one whom his mother comforts. So I will comfort you.

You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see and your heart shall rejoice. Your bone shall flourish like the grass, and the hand of the Lord shall be known to his servants.

And he shall show his indignation against his enemies. For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword with all flesh, and those slain by the Lord shall be many.

Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the Lord. For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues, and they shall come and shall see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lut, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory.

And they shall declare my glory among the nations, and they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord. Just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord, and some

of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord. For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring in your name remain.

From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me, for their worms shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. In Isaiah chapter 66, the final chapter of the book, there are several reminders of where the book first began.

Anthony Tomasino and Brevard Charles both list several of the themes and details that connect the final chapters with the opening two chapters. Both chapters 1 and 66 begin with a reference to the heavens and the earth. Both chapters have a polemic against sacrifice performed by the unrighteous.

Both personify Zion, speak of its salvation and judgment, and the gathering of all nations to her. Perhaps most notably, these themes are tackled in the same order in both chapters. Chapter 66 also continues from chapter 65 the Lord's response to the community lament of the people and prophet, which we heard in chapter 63 and 64.

Throughout the book of Isaiah, perhaps especially in chapters 40 to 55, the uniqueness of the Lord, his sovereignty over all earthly powers, and his transcendence as the eternal creator and God of all, is a pervasive and dominant theme. Back in 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 27 to 30, when Solomon built the temple, he recognized the utter incapacity of such a building to contain God. Yet he prayed that the Lord would place his name in the house and attend to people's prayers when they directed their petitions towards it.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built. Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, My name shall be there, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place, and listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place, and listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. At the beginning of this chapter, the Lord himself expresses the same truth, the insufficiency of any human house to contain him.

The temple was symbolically connected with the throne of the Lord upon the cherubim in the Holy of Holies. However, the throne of the temple was but a symbolic representation of the throne of the one who fills both heaven and earth. Israel was in constant danger of forgetting this fact and trusting in the temple itself, rather than looking to the one whose gracious presence in their midst it symbolized.

In his famous temple sermon in Jeremiah chapter 7, the prophet Jeremiah spoke out against the people's presumptuous confidence in the temple. They believed that their mere possession of the temple served as a guarantee of the Lord's favor, perhaps even that the temple gave them some sort of leverage with God. As the Lord created all things, however, there is nothing that we can give to him that he has not first given to us.

What the Lord looks for, though, is not grand and beautiful edifices, but humble hearts devoted to him. Back in chapter 57 verse 15 we read, For thus says the Lord who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, but also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. The Lord's true dwelling place is not only in the highest heavens, but with the humble and contrite believer, the person who treats his word with awe and reverence.

A contrast is drawn between such contrite persons who fear the Lord and a different class of persons who pervert the worship of the Lord. Some translators and commentators on verse 3 believe that it presents the performance of ritually correct sacrifices in some instances as tantamount to cultic abominations, presumably on account of the rebellious hearts of those performing the sacrifices. However, it seems more likely that this is a reference to people who both offered established and licit sacrifices in the temple, while also participating in the idolatrous sacrifices characteristic of Canaanite religion.

The Lord called for the exclusive devotion of his people, forbidding all syncretism, polytheism and idolatry. Yet many of the people believed that they could hedge their bets, serving both the Lord and the idols of the nations. Exacerbating the wickedness of their syncretistic and idolatrous practices, the people were proud and stubbornly delighted in their infidelity to the Lord.

Consequently, the Lord marked them out for harsh judgment. They had rejected and forsaken him, not heeded any of his overtures, and had shut their ears to his word and stubbornly pursued paths that the Lord condemned as evil. Addressing those who feared him, the Lord encourages them in a situation where they faced ridicule and social exclusion on account of their faithfulness.

Verse 5 presents some challenges for the interpreter. Are the idolatrous Jews presenting themselves as faithful, regarding themselves as acting in the name of the Lord as they ridicule and cast out their righteous brethren? Or does, for my namesake, relate to the faithfulness of the righteous that leads to their exclusion by the wicked? I lean towards the latter and understand the statement Let the Lord be glorified that we may see your joy, a scornful ridicule of the faithful people's trust in the Lord. However, despite the wicked people's confidence, it is they who will be put to shame.

In verse 6, mighty sounds are heard as the Lord begins his judgment upon his foes. There have been various instances of mother and of birth imagery in the Book of Isaiah to this point, imagery that has brought together themes of pain, of barrenness, struggle, futility, bereavement, but also of hope. In chapter 26, verses 17-19, for instance, 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 Jew is a Jew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. Also in chapter 49, verses 19-21, 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? Zion's struggle with barrenness and the Lord's reversal of that is a recurring theme in the book. In the scriptures more broadly, we see birth as a symbol of deliverance in places like the story of the Exodus, which itself is framed as a great birth narrative, as the Lord hears Israel in its pangs, opens the dark womb of Egypt, delivering his firstborn son in the Passover and the Red Sea crossing. Verses 7 and following describe another birth, a most remarkable form of reversal.

Zion is suddenly going to give birth to a son, and Zion is going to give birth not merely to one child, but to an entire nation. We could see this in part as a fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 3, verse 15, in the birth of the seed of the woman, destined to crush the serpent's head. We might also think about the way in which the servant, who is expected as the great deliverer of the people, will sum up the nation's destiny in himself.

As he is restored after suffering his pangs, he will see his seed, and many servants of the Lord shall arise from his work. The Lord is going to be the one who brings about this new birth. He is the one who guarantees to Zion her fruitfulness.

In verses 10 and 11, the Lord calls for people to share in Jerusalem's rejoicing. The city, once mourned over by those who loved her, would be made fruitful, no longer be barren, and would provide richly for all of her children. The elevation and blessing of Zion would occur through the Lord's work on her behalf.

Previously in the book of Isaiah, where we read of rivers overflowing their banks, the

image was one of pagan nations threatening the land. Now, however, the Gentile waters overflowing their banks are bearing riches and treasure to Jerusalem. The Lord would provide his people with the comfort that they needed.

After all of their afflictions, the Lord would offer them comfort, as a mother would comfort her child, in the provision offered by Jerusalem. As they saw the restoration of Jerusalem, people who had languished and been dispirited would be restored and encouraged. Bones that had wasted away would flourish, people who had mourned would rejoice, and the Lord's hand of justice would be evident within the world, blessing the righteous and judging the wicked.

In chapter 64, verses 1 to 2, the prophet had expressed his desire O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood, and the fire causes water to boil, to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence. What was expressed as a longing there, is expressed as something that will be fulfilled here. The Lord will come in fire, his chariots like the whirlwind.

The theophanic manifestation of the Lord's justice and glory that the people had yearned for would now be seen by all. He would vindicate his people and wreak vengeance upon his adversaries. As earlier chapters of the book had spoken about the gathering of the nations in judgment, so the Lord would gather them here.

The Lord would bring their evil works and their thoughts into judgment, and idolaters would be decisively cut off. Among the remnant left after these judgments, the Lord would send out survivors among the nations, bearing the news of the glory of the Lord. In these concluding verses of the book, we find many of the themes that we encountered earlier on.

The Lord entering into judgment against the nations and their false gods. The Lord displaying his glory to all of the nations, gathering in to Jerusalem from all parts of the earth, her exiled children, but also foreigners who would be made full members of the people of the Lord. This should bring our mind back again to the very beginning of the book, in chapter 2 verses 2-4.

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. A similar expectation is expressed in chapter 60 verses 1-6.

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.

A nation 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. Just as in chapter 60, the Lord here expresses his acceptance of the sacrifice of these foreigners. In the opening verses of the first chapter of this section of the book, in chapter 56, we heard of the Lord's inclusion of the foreigner among his people.

Here that inclusion goes even further. The Lord won't merely accept their offerings. He will even accept some of them as priests and Levites, as his servants, leading the people in their worship and teaching the law.

This might be part of what is meant in chapter 2 of the law going out from Zion, the law being taught and administered, not just by Jewish priests and Levites, but by people from all nations. The people so formed of faithful Jews and Gentiles brought together would endure before the Lord, their name being made great, much as in the promise made to Abraham at his call. In the new heavens and earth that would exist, a continual form of worship involving all flesh, Jews and Gentiles, would be established.

The chapter in the book ends with a note of shadow. In the advent of the brilliant light of the Lord's promised future, there would also be those who would be cast into darkness. The ceaseless continuance of the worship of the people of the Lord has as its grim counterpart the ceaseless mean existence, fiery torment and disgrace of those who rebelled against the Lord.

Elsewhere, in places like Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 32 and 33, we see dead bodies serving as a sobering reminder of the consequences of rejecting the Lord. Therefore behold the days are coming declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere, and the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away. A

question to consider, where else in the book of Isaiah and elsewhere in the prophets and other parts of the Old Testament do we find prophecies, visions and anticipations of the bringing in of the nations? Luke chapter 21 verses 5 to 38 And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.

And they asked him, Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place? And he said, See that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name, saying, I am he, and the time is at hand. Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once.

Then he said to them, Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences, and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death.

You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near.

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written. Alas for women who are pregnant, and for those who are nursing infants in those days, for there will be great distress upon the earth, and wrath against this people. They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

And he told them a parable. Look at the fig tree and all the trees, as soon as they come out in leaf you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But watch yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap, for it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth.

But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man. And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet, and early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him. In Luke chapter 21 the Olivet discourse begins with some of Jesus' disciples admiring the temple buildings.

Jesus makes clear that these buildings are not going to survive, that one stone will not be left upon another. Jesus begins by listing a number of things that would occur before his coming, but which would not themselves be signs of his coming. He ensures that his disciples don't jump at false positives.

A number of potentially unsettling world events would occur before his coming. Jesus mentions famines, earthquakes, pestilences, other natural disasters. The disciples will also face persecution, they'll be thrust out of synagogues, they'll be brought before rulers.

This will serve as an occasion for their witness before the rulers. The witness of the disciples to governors and kings is important, particularly in the book of Acts. Paul, like Jesus, faces four trials, and in these trials he bears witness to the gospel before kings and rulers.

Jesus is a king and a ruler, and the disciples are his emissaries to the rulers of this world. They will face treachery and betrayal, even from their own families, their closest relatives will turn them over. They will be hated, but if they persevere they will be saved.

Not a hair of their heads will perish, Jesus says. By their endurance they will gain their lives. There is something of a paradox here.

When you're suffering the sort of persecution that Jesus describes, how can it be said that not a hair of your head will perish? The solution to the paradox is found in the next statement, that you will gain your life through your endurance. This is what it means. Those who lose their lives for Christ's sake will gain them.

This is not the way that human reason would suggest to stay safe. You keep silent, you

don't cause trouble, you don't rock the boat, you don't upset family members and people in authority who might turn you over. However, to take that way is to lose your life, to forfeit your very soul.

Jesus instructs his disciples to flee when they see Jerusalem surrounded by armies. And at this point the Jerusalem Christians did indeed flee to the mountains, as they were instructed by Christ, to Pella in the Transjordan. Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5 in the early 4th century writes about this.

But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by revelation, vowed safe to approve men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles and totally destroyed that generation of impious men. These, Jesus says, are the days of vengeance to fulfil all that was spoken.

Here Jesus is alluding to Isaiah Chapter 61, verses 1 and 2. Now the interesting thing is we've had that verse before. That's been quoted in Luke Chapter 4, verses 18 to 19. There's something missing there.

What's missing is the reference to the day of vengeance of our God. For many modern theologians, this has suggested that Jesus was just bringing a message of complete peace, no judgment whatsoever. For John the Baptist, the question was, where is the fire? Where is the judgment that I was expecting this one coming after me to bring? Well here we see that element that was left out of the original quotation, surfacing again many chapters later.

Now in reference to that event in which Christ's wrath would truly be seen. The fire is going to come and it's going to come in AD 70. Reading such passages, many struggle with their language.

It seems cosmic and extreme. Surely the only thing it could seemingly refer to is a complete meltdown of the physical order. But that's not necessarily the case.

If we look in Isaiah Chapter 13, verse 10. Ezekiel Chapter 32, verses 7 to 8. All of this language is being used to describe the fall of Babylon and Egypt. These are historical events.

This is not the meltdown of the physical order. But it is the end of a world order. The same is true of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The whole world order will change. When we read the reference to seeing the Son of Man coming on the cloud, we think that this is a downward movement from heaven to earth. But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here.

The background of all of this is found in Daniel Chapter 7, verses 9 to 14. The Son of Man's dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the ancient days and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Seeing the Son of Man coming in the cloud is seeing the reality of this, seeing the kingdoms of the world becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and Christ, which all begins with judgment falling upon Jerusalem.

And when they see this, they should lift themselves up, they should be alert, they should recognize that the days of the Lord have come. This is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants. Jesus gives the parable of the fig tree, the fig tree being a symbol connected with Israel.

Just as they are able to read the signs of the seasons in a tree, they shall see the signs of these times and recognize that the time has come. And that generation will not pass away until everything occurred, not just some of it, all of it. This makes it very hard to argue that this is referring to anything other than the events of AD 70.

In the statement about heaven and earth passing away but Christ's words not passing away, Jesus is probably alluding to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 6. The fact that Jesus says that all these things would occur within that generation and then immediately declares how certain his words are has proved an embarrassment for many Christians. It might seem that Jesus' words did not come to pass after all, that Jesus' claims about the sure nature of his word are not in fact true. But yet, all of these things did come to pass.

They came to pass in the destruction of Jerusalem and the events surrounding that. And if we know how to read Old Testament prophecy, none of this should be surprising to us. Jesus is using the language of the Old Testament prophets.

Jesus was not a false prophet then, rather he faithfully foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. He ends the discourse with a charge to watchfulness and wakefulness. For everyone else, life will be going on as normal, but they must keep awake so that the day does not trap them.

Everything seems to be going on as it always has, and then suddenly everything changes in a moment. Your entire world order, which you thought so absolutely rock solid and certain, can collapse. How do you avoid getting destroyed with this? You keep awake.

You watch. You ensure that you do not get trapped in the cares of this life, in dissipation

and drunkenness. You pray fervently that you might have the strength to stand before the Son of Man, to escape all of the fate that is coming upon the world, and to prove to be faithful in that day of testing.

A question to consider, how in Jesus' description of these coming days would his disciples be progressively distinguished from the people around them?