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December 12th: Isaiah 55 & Luke 14:25—15:10

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Come to the waters! The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 55 make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you because of the Lord your God and of the Holy One of Israel, for He has glorified you.

Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake His way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him return to the Lord, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Like chapter 54, Isaiah chapter 55 describes the blessings that flow from the purpose of the Lord achieved through the work of the servant, closing this section of the book. Chapter 54 described the restored city of Zion, and in this chapter we have summons to receive the blessings of restoration, to enter into the full enjoyment of God's bounty.

John Goldengaze sees two corresponding panels to this chapter. In verse 1 and verses 6 and 7 there is a summons. In verses 2 and the first half of verse 3, and verses 8 and 9 there are reasons why the people ought to listen to the Lord.

And then in the second half of verse 3 and verses 10 and 11 there is an accompanying promise. In verse 4 and the first half of verse 5, and verse 12 and the first half of verse 13 there is the consequence of the response to the summons. And then in the second half of verse 5 and the second half of verse 13 there is the Lord's purpose achieved through it all.

The chapter begins with a scene that we might imagine as a voice crying out in the marketplace, yet the offer of this vendor is a most peculiar one. He is offering drink and food to the thirsty and hungry, yet without any requirement of payment. The offer of water and food might suggest a situation of water shortage and famine conditions, perhaps as a result of war or siege.

Both the drink and the food are offered openly, generally and freely, with no cost or restriction. Elsewhere the gift of water to a parched land and a thirsty people is connected with the spirit. We might think of Jesus' offers of water in the Gospel of John, whether to the woman at the well or in the temple speech in chapter 7. Here it is specifically those who have no money who are invited to come.

And it's not merely the bare essentials that they are offered. Wine and milk are also offered freely to any who will receive them. This rich fare is contrasted to what the people might otherwise spend their money upon and devote their labour to, food and drink, that is not satisfying.

This offer of food is so that the people can have life and have it to the full. It's not merely an offer of physical sustenance. It's an offer of spiritual blessings.

Through the work of the servant there is great blessing and plenty for the people. And now the imperatives are calling people to enjoy what the Lord has brought about for

them. In particular, the promise here is an everlasting covenant, a covenant that will endure, that will not be at risk of being broken like the Mosaic covenant.

The covenant in view here is the Davidic covenant, a covenant grounded upon the Lord's unilateral promises to the house of David. This implicitly grounds the blessings that the people will enjoy in this restored Zion upon the work of the Messiah, whom we might reasonably identify with the suffering servant. Under the Davidic covenant the fate of the nation is very strongly correlated with the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of their king.

This is not merely on account of the way in which the king provides an example, either good or bad, but also because the Lord deals with his people through the person of the king. In the troubled history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, we can see the failure of king after king. However, one of the effects of the Davidic covenant is to direct people's hopes towards a king that will be enduringly faithful, a king who will secure the nation's standing and destiny.

People's eyes would thereby be raised to the awaited figure of the Messiah. David is here described as a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. David and his house were not just leaders of the nation, but also witnesses to other nations round about.

We might think about the influence of Solomon upon the region as people came to hear from him and to learn from his wisdom, the Queen of Sheba coming from far off, for instance. One of the messianic hopes was that people from distant lands would learn about the Lord through the faithful king. John Oswald suggests that, against many commentators, the you that is in view in verse 5 is the Messiah or the servant, rather than the nation more generally.

Other nations would come to the faithful servant, and this would all be because the Lord, here again described as the Holy One of Israel, had glorified him. The Lord's vindication of his faithful servant leads to the extension of the servant's reign. In verses 6-13 we have a parallel section with verses 1-5.

As in verse 1 it begins with an imperative and an invitation. The invitation here is to seek the Lord and to call upon him. The Lord is near and he can be found by any who will seek him.

The seeking in view here is not just asking for counsel of the Lord or seeking his answer to a particular prayer, rather it is a matter of seeking his presence in their lives. It is a matter of rejecting the ways of wickedness and seeking the ways of the Lord. Any who will return to the Lord in such a fashion are assured of the Lord's compassion and pardon.

All of the blessings described in this chapter are freely offered. The Lord is not

withholding them from anyone. He requests only people's recognition of their need, that they come without money, and the blessings that they are promised in response are bountiful.

The Lord is not parsimonious. He eagerly desires to give his good gifts to people. How, people might wonder, could this be, considering all the ways in which Israel had rejected the Lord? How could the Lord offer such a free pardon and such bountiful gifts? The Lord assures his people that his ways are above their ways and his thoughts above their thoughts.

He will not deal with them as their sins deserve, treating them as they might treat their neighbour. The contrast between the heavens and the earth in verse 9 provides, as Oswald notes, a motif that continues in verse 10. Precipitation in rain and snow comes from the heavens and gives life to the earth.

In much the same way, the word of the Lord is that which gives life to the land. As the Lord pours out his spirit upon a once parched earth, it will blossom with new life. The Lord's word is the source of this life, the prophetic promise, for instance, that waters hopes in eager hearts.

Much as in verse 10 and 11, heaven and earth are united in rain and answering fruitfulness, in verses 12 and 13, the people and the land are united. The land itself is described as rejoicing and breaking forth in clapping and singing as the people are restored to it. The thorns and the briars that were described as taking over the land in the earlier parts of the book of Isaiah are now replaced by cypress and myrtle.

As in verse 5, in verse 13 we see that the end of all of this is the glorification of the Lord and his name. While an initial fulfilment of this could be seen in the people's return from Babylon, it seems to have a broader reference. In such a passage we see the crystallisation of the greater hope of Israel, of which there are partial realisations and glimpses in various times and places, but which still awaits its full realisation.

This is a word of hope and assurance to the heroes of the prophet, who even in dark days, can, as they live by the word of the Lord, know something of this chapter's promise of sustenance and fruitfulness and the presence of the Lord. A question to consider, how do Davidic themes within this chapter pick up some threads from the earlier chapters of the book of Isaiah? Luke chapter 14 verse 25 to chapter 15 verse 10 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is

not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. What king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them. So he told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing.

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.

Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. At the end of Luke chapter 14, Jesus expresses the cost of discipleship in the most arresting possible terms. People must hate their own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters in order to follow him.

They must hate their own life. Indeed, if they do not do these things, they cannot be his disciples. Now Jesus is clearly not telling us literally to hate others, as if the feeling of hatred towards our family members and our own lives were essential to discipleship.

That is not the case. Rather, hatred here refers to the merciless cutting off of loyalties that would supersede our commitment to Christ and following him. Faced with the claim of Christ, nothing else can take priority.

The fact that Jesus makes such claims upon people, for himself, is a sign of his authority. No mere man could rightfully make such claims upon the loyalties of others without falling into idolatry. Disciples must take up their crosses and follow Jesus.

The cross that Jesus was talking about was a symbol that had power. When Jesus hearers heard him use this word, they would be thinking about a gruesome means of execution.

A person must count the cost if he wants to be a disciple of Christ.

We can often present being a disciple in the most positive of terms, suggesting that it will make people's lives wonderful. By contrast, Jesus presents discipleship as deeply demanding, and alerts us to how hard it is. We try to sell discipleship like a product, while Jesus challenges prospective disciples to demonstrate their level of commitment to him.

If anyone, Jesus is in the position of the buyer in the transaction. Seems to me we haven't really reflected half enough upon the significance of these verses when it comes to Christian evangelism. We peddle a vision of what Jesus can do for us, rather than summoning people to the costly commitment of discipleship.

True discipleship requires a renunciation of all these different things that would stand in the way of Christ. Family, one's own life, all your possessions. You must lose all in order to follow Christ and ultimately to gain your life and have riches in heaven.

The chapter ends with a warning. Salt gives savour, it's a sort of solid fire, but if it loses its savour, then what use is it? Salt can't salt itself. Salt is always salt for something else.

Disciples that have ceased to bring a savour to the world are of no use, and they'll end up being thrown out and destroyed, trampled underfoot in the other gospel account. Chapter 15 contains a triplet of parables. These parables need to be read together.

They each develop a single theme in a different way, and the contrast and the progression between them matters. As we read the parables, it's important to keep in mind that they are addressed to the Pharisees and to the scribes. They respond to their objection that Jesus is eating with sinners.

The first parable is about a shepherd. Jesus, of course, is the Good Shepherd, and he is addressing the false shepherds of Israel. This sort of symbolism has a background in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 1 to 4. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, declares the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people, you have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the Lord.

Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed. Neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.

And then in Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 10 to 16. Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am

against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves.

I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep.

And I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God.

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. It seems to me that the shepherd here is not necessarily God, but the ideal leader and teacher of Israel, who reflects God's own character.

The parable reveals the sin of the scribes and the Pharisees. They have destroyed, scattered, and fleeced the flock of Israel. They did not seek the lost.

The finding of the lost sheep leads to a feast of celebration, the joy of which reflects the joy of heaven itself. Jesus' meals with tax collectors and sinners enact this celebration of the discovery of the lost. Not only are the Pharisees and scribes failing to seek the lost sheep of Israel, they also locked themselves out of the joyful feast of celebration.

The recovery of the lost sheep might also remind us of the idea of the Lord's restoring the soul of the psalmist in Psalm 23 verse 3. The parable of the lost coin is the second parable in the cycle. The woman has ten coins, of which she has lost one. Now the ten coins might be her personal savings, which would be very valuable to her if she were poor.

Alternatively, the ten coins might be part of a bridal garland or dowry, and she has lost one of those, which would be a very serious thing to lose. The coin would be part of the mark of her marital status. Who is the woman? It seems to me that the woman might be Israel.

The implication is that the recovered lost sinners of the house of Israel are akin to the marks of Israel's status as God's bride. I wouldn't put too much weight upon that reading, but it's worth considering. The other thing to notice here is that these two parables

follow Luke's common pattern of having a character in a story or a figure in the narrative that is a man, followed by one who's a woman.

This is one of the ways that Luke expresses the extent of the gospel, that it is addressed to both men and to women. The house imagery might also be worth reflecting upon. We've already read of the swept house in chapter 11 verse 25 in relation to the casting out of Satan.

We have also already seen a number of references to lamps, chapter 11 verses 33 to 36 and chapter 12 verse 35, and there might be some allusion to the temple here. Jesus is a true son of the bride, sweeping out Satan from the house, relighting the lamp of Israel and recovering the marks of Israel's marital status by recovering lost sinners. He makes the unswept and dark house of Israel the site of a joyous feast.

By contrast, the scribes and the Pharisees are leaving the house dark, unswept of Satan, and are losing the marks of marriage. Once again, the focus is upon the celebration that follows. If there is joy and celebration in heaven, how much more is it justified on earth? A question to consider.

The conclusion of both these parables is an invitation to rejoice with the person who has found the last item. Within this chapter and the chapter that precedes it, the theme of invitation in the context of meals is prominent. What can we learn from reflecting upon this theme as Luke portrays it within these two chapters?