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December 11th: Isaiah 54 & Luke 14:1-24

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Zion restored. The Parable of the Great Banquet.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 54. Sing, O barren one, who did not bear. Break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor.

For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out. Do not hold back.

Lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes, for you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations, and will people the desolate cities. Fear not, for you will not be ashamed. Be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced.

For you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name, and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.

For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. This is like the days of Noah to me, as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you.

For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you. O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of agate, your gates of carbuncles, and all your wall of precious stones.

All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children. In righteousness you shall be established. You shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear, and from terror, for it shall not come near you.

If anyone stirs up strife, it is not from me. Whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you. Behold, I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals, and produces a weapon for its purpose.

I have also created the ravager to destroy. No weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication from me, declares the Lord.

In Isaiah chapter 53 the figure of the servant was portrayed and his great work, the work by which the Lord's hand was laid bare before the nations, was described. In chapter 54 we see a woman who corresponds in many respects with the servant of the preceding chapter. John Goldingay writes, After the concentration on Miss Zion in most of 49.14-52.12, the passage brings about a sharp transition in the focus on a male servant.

The female figure then reappears in chapter 54, and as chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12 follows on from chapter 52 verses 7-10 and develops some of its motifs, so does the portrait of the restored city in chapter 54 verse 1-17a in relation to chapter 52 verse 13 to chapter 53 verse 12. As the servant is the object of contempt, the woman is the object of shame. As the servant is to be exalted, the woman is to be beautified.

As the servant will see offspring, so will the woman. As the servant will confound the nations and gain them as spoil, the woman will dispossess nations and settle towns they abandon. As the servant brings about shalom, the woman will enjoy a shalom covenant.

With chapter 55 this chapter presents the glorious fruits of the Lord's redemptive work in his servant. Its opening might recall chapter 49 verse 13, which comes at the climax of the description of the work of the servant in verses 1-12 of that chapter. Sing for joy, O

heavens, and exalt, O earth! Break forth, O mountains, into singing, for the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.

This chapter celebrates the wonder of the Lord's deliverance and the blessing of a renewed relationship between him and his people after they have been put in right standing with him through the work of his servant. In earlier chapters Zion was pictured as a woman who was bereaved of her husband, was sent away from him and robbed of her children. In chapter 51 verses 17-20 for instance, Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering.

There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne, there is none to take her by the hand among all the sons she has brought up. These two things have happened to you. Who will console you? Devastation and destruction, famine and sword.

Who will comfort you? Your sons have fainted, they lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net. They are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God. However the barren and forsaken woman would be marvelously restored, something already described in chapter 49 verses 18-23.

Lift up your eyes around and see, they all gather, they come to you. 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. Barrenness is a very common theme in the Bible, most notably in the story of the great matriarchs of Israel, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

It is also a prominent theme at the beginning of the story of the kingdom in Hannah and at the beginning of the story of the gospel in Elizabeth. The Lord's overcoming of barrenness also connects with his gift of children of promise, not children born merely of natural virility and fertility, but children that are born through the Lord's overcoming of the weakness and insufficiency of the flesh. As in chapter 49, the woman who thinks that

she has no children will have to enlarge the place of her habitation to accommodate all of her offspring.

In this she would be glorified beyond the woman who was married with many children. Her land would be repopulated and her shame would be overcome. The shame of her barrenness and the disgrace of having seemingly been cut off by her husband for her unfaithfulness would no longer be brought to her mind.

The explanation for all of this is found in the fact that her husband is the Lord. He is the one who both made her and will redeem her and as the creator and Lord of the whole earth his power is sufficient. As when the prophet Hosea took back the unfaithful Gomer, the Lord would call back Zion to himself.

Verses 7 and 8 contrast the briefness of the period of time for which she was cast off and the anger of that moment and the everlasting love and the great compassion with which she will be restored. Her restoration will not just be temporary. The Lord recalls the covenant with Noah, the promise that he would never again destroy the world with a flood.

In a similar way, the overflowing flood of the Lord's wrath would never overwhelm and destroy Israel again. The commitment of the Lord's steadfast love for his people is firmer and more enduring than the mountains and the hills. Having compared Zion to a forsaken and restored unfaithful wife, in verse 11 the imagery shifts to that of a city.

The Lord's reestablishment of Zion is going to be a great glorification. The Lord will rebuild it with precious and glorious stones placed in the most attractive settings. Zion's foundations and walls will be like the skilled work of a master jeweler, precious in his sight, something that he takes considerable care over and a manifestation of his close concern and attention.

Within the portrayal in Isaiah, Zion's relationship with her children was one of the most tragic aspects of her plight. Her children were taken away from her, they were unresponsive to teaching and they suffered great hardship. However, now her children will be taught by the Lord.

In this we might think of the children of Zion taking on the character of the servant who is presented as the great example of the attentive and obedient son. As John Goldengay notes, the transition from the stones of the city to the children of the city is a shift that might be eased by the similarities of the words in the Hebrew. As the children of Zion are taught by the Lord, the healthy succession of the people is secured.

One of the great tragedies of a nation or a people is when the relationship between the generations breaks down, either in decadence when the older generation does not lay up and prepare and advance itself into the future, or in revolution where the younger

generation either turns its back upon or seeks to overthrow the legacy of their fathers. A situation where each generation makes sacrifices for the next while delivering a harvest on the sacrifices of the previous generation is the ideal. The city will be established in righteousness.

This righteousness might be the saving justice of the Lord or perhaps it is the uprightness of a city that is ordered after his law. The Lord would protect the city from all its foes and any that rose against them would be destroyed. The Lord assures his people that because he is the one who created the weapon and the one who wields it, no weapon raised against them will be successful.

Likewise all of their accusers will be dumbfounded by the Lord's vindication of his people. Many elements of this chapter might recall the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 37. I will make them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord. I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts and I will be their guard and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more. I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done declares the Lord.

In reading the end of this chapter we should recall the end of the preceding chapter concerning the work of the servant. The servant would make many righteous and the end of this chapter talks about the vindication of the people of the Lord. We should connect the two.

Likewise we should see the servants of the Lord as in some sense a multiplication of the servant himself. This is the seed, this is the generation of the servant that was promised. A question to consider.

In Galatians chapter 4 verse 27 the apostle Paul cites verse 1 of this chapter. How might an understanding of the context of the verse in this chapter help us better to understand what Paul is doing with that text in his epistle. Luke chapter 14 verses 1 to 24.

1 Sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? But they remained silent.

Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, Which of you

having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day will not immediately pull him out? And they could not reply to these things. Now he told the parable to those who were invited when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him.

And he who invited you both will come and say to you, Give your place to this person. And then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, Friend, move up higher.

Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. He said also to the man who had invited him, When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.

But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God. But he said to him, A man once gave a great banquet and invited many, and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.

And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame. And the servant said, Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.

And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. Luke chapter 14 is set at the meal table.

The kingdom is like a great supper, and the way of the kingdom is seen in its table manners. Jesus heals on the Sabbath again, and we should observe the parallels with chapter 13 verses 10 to 17. There is a reference here to a son or an ox, but in other textual versions it's the donkey or the ox.

This is referring back to Deuteronomy chapter 5 and the law of the Sabbath in that place. Jesus is the one who is bringing in the Sabbath rest and his feast. The man is suffering from dropsy, a condition involving fluid retention and a dangerous thirst, and Jesus heals him and thereby addresses his thirst, perhaps something that could be seen as a symbol of longing for deliverance.

In his famous work *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias explores the transformation of manners between the Middle Ages and the 18th century. He observes the way that our animality and things associated with it were gradually removed from public sight through instilling embarrassment, shame, and aversion surrounding contact with other bodies, the display of excessive passions and sexuality or behaviours that foreground our physicality, things like nose-blowing or spitting, urinating or nudity. Elias identified a political impulse behind much of this.

It had its root in the rise of a new courtly class, and observing the new rigorous etiquette of the court became necessary for inclusion and advancement in polite society, and social jockeying in the realm of the refinement of tastes and manners and civility steadily displaced the martial values of previous ages. Now the meal table was ground zero for this training and expression of this new regime of conduct. It spread from courtiers to the higher classes of society and beyond, and these new virtues of self-control, dignity, and concealment of and distancing from animality was taught and manifested at meal tables until what originated as a social compulsion became a part of people's very psychology, a second nature.

The rise of civility in the West then was a social development of the manners of the meal table that undergirded and spread a new political order, privileging cultivated courtly elites. The political importance of the meal table within this development was manifold. The meal table was, and remains, a reflection of the relations between people and of their place within a broader social and material world.

Each meal was, and still remains, an opportunity to secure or advance one's place within this social order. What on earth does any of this have to do with Luke chapter 14? Well, as our passage shows, the same was true in Jesus' day. The meal table and the throwing of banquets were arenas within which people negotiated and competed for social status.

It was also a site of intense social scrutiny, and Jesus was being closely examined by the Pharisees who wanted to see what his table manners would reveal about him. Jesus, however, was engaging in a sort of sociological study of his own. He perceived and remarked upon some distinguishing features of mealtime behaviour in first-century Jewish honour society – dinner guests pressing for the best seats, hosts inviting the sort of people from whom they could hope for repayment or improved social status.

And Jesus in these verses addresses both groups. He teaches an alternative model of table etiquette. This model of table etiquette is not entirely new – much of Jesus'

teaching in this passage comes from the Old Testament and elsewhere.

In Proverbs 25, verses 6-7, Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence, or stand in the place of the great. For it is better to be told, Come up here, than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. Richard Hayes has remarked, In the Lukan narrative context, this teaching becomes more than a pragmatic hint about court etiquette.

It is implicitly a directive about how the coming kingdom should impinge already on the present, producing a reversal of values and status. In the eschatological kingdom of God, the last will be first, and the first last. Therefore, those who are Jesus' followers should begin already to assume roles of lowliness.

Jesus' teaching involves, then, as Hayes recognises, a rehearsal for the manners of the in-breaking kingdom. Rather than trying to curry favour with their rich neighbours and adopting the manners of the regional rulers, the people of God are to cultivate the etiquette of a different kingdom. They are to behave as prospective members of a different court.

Jesus instructs his heroes to act against their apparent social interests, in the sure faith that God's order will prevail over all others. The table manners that Jesus called for involved the rejection of the sort of honour culture practiced in many first century Mediterranean societies. Instead of grasping for honour, Jesus' followers should be characterised by humility and self-effacement.

While seating arrangements and dinner invitations were means for social climbers to accrue honour and status in their society, Jesus challenges his disciples to reject the way of honour seekers, and like their master to seek the praise of God over that of man. Abstaining from social jockeying in a society where so much depended upon one's honour and status is a very costly act of faith. The necessity of a new form of practice grounded in radical faith in the coming kingdom is perhaps even more pronounced in Jesus' challenge to hosts in the later verses of this passage.

Rather than inviting people who can be relied upon to give a generous return upon their social investment, Jesus' followers must throw their feasts for people with no power to repay. In a society where the exchange of gifts and invitations to feasts was the basic currency by which you secured your social standing, Jesus' radical practice would be seen to be reckless. One's political, legal and social position could become precarious if one was not prepared to throw one's weight into maintaining circles of reciprocal gift.

If one did not give gifts and invitations to the right people, one wouldn't receive the return of social honour or any assurance of social security. Consistently giving gifts and invitations to the wrong people might be an even riskier course of action. It would offend and dissociate you from people with social power.

Greco-Roman thinkers who have reflected upon the significance of gifts, such as Cicero, commonly stressed the moral importance of giving judiciously. To give freely to the poor who lack the means to give a worthy return, being regarded not only economically but typically also as morally withoutstanding, might reflect poorly upon the prudence and the character of the giver. Jesus doesn't utterly reject the underlying logic of the gift society, but rather completely transforms its functioning by revealing that God is the guarantor of all gifts and debts.

If we give in faith to the poor and to those without the capacity to repay, we will receive a bountiful reward at the resurrection. Conversely, we need not be placed in others' debt when we receive their gifts, because God has promised to repay them on our behalf. Jesus tells us to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind to our suppers, rather than people who can repay us.

God is the one who will reward us with a place at his table in the resurrection of the just. And here the connection between Jesus' teaching in these verses and the teaching of the parable of the great supper that immediately follows should be recognised. It is the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, precisely the same people as his disciples are called to invite to their feasts in verse 13, who are the people who sit at God's great supper, while the rich reject their invitation.

In associating themselves with those without social status then, the disciples of Christ would be associating themselves with those who would one day sit at the great eschatological banquet. Inviting people to this great banquet, the man finds one guest after another turning down his invitation for various weak excuses. We should note the similarity of this situation to the one in which Jesus presently finds himself.

It is a meal with the ruler of the Pharisees, with presumably many people of high status and social standing in attendance. The feast of the parable proceeds in a typical way. It begins with invitations being sent out to socially respectable people, but things go awry.

They are all too committed to their possessions and relationships to accept the invitation. As his invitation has been spurned by the well-to-do, the man then turns to the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, and then goes out beyond that still to find even more destitute persons outside of the city. This has often been related to marginal Jews and Gentiles.

These people must be compelled into the feast, presumably because they knew that they couldn't offer anything in return and there was an apparent social gulf between them and their host. However, their host wasn't playing the old dynamics of a patronage culture any more. A complete social reordering had occurred for him, and he now cut off association with the original invitees.

A question to consider. How does the celebration of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper

provide us with training in the table manners of the Kingdom?