

# OpenTheo

## December 21st: Isaiah 64 & Luke 20:1-26

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Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down! The Parable of the Wicked Tenants.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 64. Oh, 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. When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you and your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned.

In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you, for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

But now, O Lord, you are our Father, we are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity for ever.

Behold, please look, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent and afflict us so terribly? Isaiah chapter 56-66 is the larger concluding section for the book of Isaiah. This section can be broken down further into at least three sub-sections, chapters 56-59, 60-62, and 63-66. These sub-sections also follow a loose chiasmic structure, with the final chapters returning to themes in chapters 56-59.

This was perhaps most noticeable at the beginning of chapter 63. The central chapters of the section, chapter 61 being the very heart, contain messages of salvation, of the restoration and glorification of Zion, and the good news brought by the anointed servant. The community lament that began in the second half of chapter 63 continues and concludes in chapter 64.

John Oswald breaks down its structure as follows. Expanded historical reminiscence in chapter 63 verses 7-14, complaint in chapter 63 verses 15-19, confession in chapter 64 verses 1-7, and then finally, appeal in chapter 64 verses 8-12. Having spoken of the alienation of, and the distance of the people from the Lord, the prophet now expresses his longing for the Lord's visitation of his people, demonstrating his sovereignty over his foes and in the sight of all the nations.

The imagery of verses 1-3 is classic theophanic imagery of the Lord overcoming the great divide between him and his afflicted people, tearing open the firmament and descending from the heavens, mountains quaking before him. We might here recall the description of the Lord's coming at Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19 verses 16-19. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder. At Sinai the Lord descended in fire and in Isaiah's request for the Lord to visit his people, fire is again the most prominent aspect of the imagery. Fire consumes kindling and causes water to boil, devouring or transforming all with which it

comes into contact.

The same is true of the presence of the Lord. One of the immediate effects of such a coming, the prophet believes, is that the Lord's fame would be spread among the nations and all might quake before him, just as the mountains before their Creator. The Lord had acted in such a manner for his people in the past.

In the preceding chapter the prophet had recounted the great work of the Lord in the Exodus and as we have seen, the theophany at Sinai matched the description of the longed-for descent of the Lord that Isaiah calls for here. Indeed, the deliverance of the Exodus was an act of the Lord's own initiative, neither something that his people sought nor imagined. Looking at the great deeds of the Lord in history, it is evident that there is no other God like him, no rival comparable to him in power and in faithfulness.

The Lord is a God who hears and responds to the prayers of his people, delivering them from their oppressors and establishing them in security. Those who walk in the path of righteousness, committing themselves to the way of the Lord, trusting in him and expectant of his redemption, will enjoy the Lord's response when they seek him. He himself will meet them.

However, this is unfortunately not the position in which the people find themselves. Facing the anger of the Lord, they responded by sinning and persevering in sin rather than by turning back to the Lord. The prophet asks whether any hope remains for them of salvation.

There is nothing in them that would merit the Lord's gracious acceptance, thoroughly defiled and polluted by their iniquities as they are. The rot is pervasive and deep, afflicting everyone in every part of their lives. The situation is comparable to that which existed prior to the Lord's destruction of the world in the flood.

It should also recall Isaiah's description of himself as a man of unclean lips dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips in chapter 6 verse 5. Sin is like leprosy and even the supposed righteous acts of such sinful persons are as defiled as menstrual cloths. The polluting character of sin and the corruption of the flesh was one of the primary lessons of the sacrificial system which constantly recalled people to this reality. Flesh is corrupt but it is also frail and transitory.

It fades like a leaf, withers like grass, like chaff that is blown away in the wind, whipped up by man's iniquity. Wherever he looks, the prophet sees no source of hope in man, no exception to the rule of corruption who might take hold of the Lord. The message of the prophet here is that of total depravity, of the corruption of every part of man and the utter inability of man to accomplish his own turning to the Lord.

Unless the Lord acts to quicken their hearts, there is nothing residing in the people that

would rouse them to seek God. Yet the Lord has hidden his face from his people, giving them over to their iniquities. The situation seemed utterly hopeless.

Where might the one seeking the Lord find purchase for his petitions in such a dire situation? The prophet appeals to the Lord's relationship with his people as their father and creator, to the unilateral, unconditioned, gracious action by which the Lord first brought his people into existence and to the way that their existence and fate is purely in his hands. The Lord is compared to a potter and his people to the clay that he is working upon. A familiar image from passages like Jeremiah 18 or Romans chapter 9, an image used elsewhere in Isaiah in chapter 29 verse 16 for instance.

The potter is over the clay and can fashion it as he wills. However, as the potter is the master of the clay, his good creative intent can overcome the resistance of the clay, moulding it for his own purposes. If the Lord were to treat people according to their sins, there would be no hope.

Consequently, the prophet pleads that the Lord recall the people are his people and that, irrespective of their iniquities, he has graciously committed himself to securing their good and has placed his name upon them. Indeed, the cities that are desolate and devastated are his cities. Zion, the city of David, the city of the Lord's delight, the site of his holy dwelling, is ruined and burned.

The Lord's own glory and name are also at stake here. Can the Lord turn a blind eye to all of this? Can he see the ruin of his own people and not act? The prophet never denies the justice of the Lord's judgment of his sinful people, but throws himself and his people upon the Lord's mercy, calling for the Lord to recognize them once more. A question to consider.

How does scripture teach us about the corrupt state of humanity here and elsewhere? Luke chapter 20 verses 1 to 26. One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority? He answered them, I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? And they discussed it with one another, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say, Why did you not believe him? But if we say from man, all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.

So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And he began to tell the people this parable.

A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give

him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third.

This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. Perhaps they will respect him.

But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours. And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. When they heard this, they said, Surely not. But he looked directly at them and said, What then is this that is written? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them. But they feared the people.

So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to liver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. So they asked him, Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not? But he perceived their craftiness, and said to them, Show me a denarius.

Whose likeness and inscription does it have? They said, Caesar's. He said to them, Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marvelling at his answer, they became silent.

Luke chapter 20 comes after Jesus has entered the city of Jerusalem like a king, and declared judgement upon the temple. There are people gathering around him and behind him, he's the head of a movement. And we have the privilege of knowing how the story ends, and so we anticipate the direction it's taking.

But imagine what it was like for people there at that time. They're thinking that the kingdom's about to come imminently. They're asking Jesus about this.

Jesus has to teach them concerning it, teaching them things they do not yet understand, that like a nobleman he will have to go away and receive a kingdom and then come back. Seeing the growing popularity of Jesus and the movement around him, the leaders

of the people are threatened, and they immediately try and trap him. They do this by asking the source of his authority.

If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed. If he claims it is from God, they have other grounds by which they could move against him. And Jesus answers their question with a question.

Yet the answer to the question that Jesus asks is the answer to the question that the chief priests and the elders have asked him. John the Baptist was sent by God and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorised and bore witness to his son. Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does on several occasions.

The parable of the tenants that follows is important to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard. Jesus introduces the parable in a way that highlights the background of Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1-7 read Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard.

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.

And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste.

It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.

And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit. Jesus' focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it.

The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious. In his ministry Jesus talks about the fields white to harvest, and the desire that labourers would go out and harvest it. And yet the workers in God's field are not faithful.

Likewise, there is a flock, and the shepherds are abusing the flock. The distinction between Israel and its leaders is important here. It's part of the meaning of the parable.

The master sends his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being

rejected. Jesus is foretelling his own death within this parable, and people who are involved in his death are hearing it. In Genesis chapter 37 verses 18 to 20 I think we see part of the background that Jesus is alluding to here.

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.

Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams. Joseph, in that case, is the threat to his brothers. They believe he's the one that's going to inherit, and they want to destroy him.

Likewise, driven by envy, the wicked tenants seek to destroy the son. The tenants will be deprived of their position. This isn't a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes.

Their places will be taken by the Twelve and others, who are the true tenants now of the vineyard of Israel. This looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned, it's given into different hands.

Jesus quotes as an interpretation of much of his teaching in this parable, Psalm 118 verse 22, The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And this quotation interprets the parable. It shows something of the necessity that Christ must die, that he must be rejected by the wicked tenants.

This was also a verse used for apologetic purposes by the early church. We see it in 1 Peter 2 verses 4 and 7, and also in Acts 4 verse 11. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.

This is one of the texts that looks forward to Christ's rejection by his people and his resurrection. The parable reveals that the Davidic Messiah had to die, and the verse confirms this. The rejected son is the rejected stone, and the builders are associated with the religious leaders, as they were associated with the wicked tenants.

Note also the way that this brings temple themes to the forefront. There is a cornerstone being set up, a new building is going to be erected. Christ is the rejected stone, but becomes the cornerstone of a new temple that the Lord is building.

There are also allusions here to Isaiah chapter 8 verses 14 to 15, and Daniel chapter 2 verses 44 to 45. Isaiah chapter 8, And then in Daniel chapter 2, It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms, and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this.

The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure. The chief priests and the scribes now send spies to try and trap Jesus. Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question.

To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the Roman's authority in the Holy Land. The Denarius itself likely had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God. One way or another, Jesus is caught, it seems.

Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and the revolutions against Rome, and can easily be handed over to the governor and put to death for that, or he will seem to be like a compromiser with Rome, and he will lose credibility with the crowd. And his answer is a profoundly shrewd one. First of all, he asks them to produce a coin.

They must reveal that they have one of the coins in their possession. The Jews could have their own coinage, the temple coin for instance, but they clearly had such coins in their possession. The answer rent to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, is an ambiguous one.

To some it might be saying, give Caesar what is coming to him, and to others it might be seeming to say, pay your taxes. But there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness to be dispossessed of such an item, that's part of it.

There are also dues to be paid both to Caesar and to God. The claims of God put limits upon the claims of Caesar. The reasoning of Jesus is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something for services given, all the different ways in which Caesar provides security for the land, and resources and services within the land.

Those things do give a reason to pay taxes to him. Also, God has established him as the ruler, and for that reason they must acknowledge that he is the bearer of the sword. Even an occupying force could be a legitimate authority under certain conditions.

Jesus makes an important point here. He's not just escaping a trap. He treads the line between compliance and resistance.

Rendering to God what is God's limits what Caesar gets. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. A question to consider.

Can you think of any ways in which Jesus' teaching concerning paying taxes to Caesar, and the way to treat authorities like Caesar, is developed in other parts of the New Testament concerning the authority of rulers?