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December 9th: Isaiah 52 & Luke 12:54—13:9

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How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news. Knowing the times.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 52. My people went down at the first into Egypt to sojourn there, and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing. Now therefore, what have I here? declares the Lord, seeing that my people are taken away for nothing.

Their rulers wail, declares the Lord, and continually all the day my name is despised. Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak.

Here I am. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns. The voice of your watchmen, they lift up their voice, together they sing for joy, for eye to eye they see the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of

our God. Depart, depart, go out from there, touch no unclean thing, go out from the midst of her.

Purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard. Behold, my servant shall act wisely, he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.

As many were astonished at you, his appearance was so marred beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind, so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. In Isaiah chapter 52, the section that began in verse 9 of the preceding chapter continues until verse 12.

In verse 9 of that chapter, the people had called upon the Lord to awake, recalling his mighty deeds of old in the Exodus, and also repeating the words of the Lord's promise that crowned chapter 35 at the climax of that earlier body of prophecies. In his response to them in verse 17, the Lord had reassured them of his coming deliverance, responding to their petition that he awake, by charging them to awake, to awake from their stupor of judgment, and to brace themselves for his coming redemption. Chapter 52 also opens with another summons to awake, addressed again to Zion by the Lord.

It perfectly echoes and answers the people's summons to him in the preceding chapter. Awake, awake, put on strength. It is the people who are really the ones that need to prepare themselves.

Zion, drunk with the cup of the Lord's judgment, lying in the filth of her exile for her sins, is instructed not merely to get up, but to prepare herself for exaltation and the Lord's glorious visitation, clothing herself with strength and beauty. The splendor and majesty of Jerusalem as the royal city, and of Zion as the Lord's bride, will be restored. Released from the defilement of the uncircumcised and the unclean, she would appear in her true God-given radiance, appearing as the Lord himself sees her.

John Goldingay observes the contrast between the city of Babylon, which in chapter 47 verse 1 was instructed to vacate its throne and come down and sit in the dust, and Zion, which is to stand up and shake off the dust and be seated on its throne. These two cities, as at the end of Revelation, are juxtaposed, the elevation of the one corresponding to the humiliation of the other. The liberation of Zion is something that she is called to enter fully into.

As she is released, she must arise and loose her bonds. She is going to be elevated to rule in the Lord's grace. She must dress and comport herself accordingly.

In chapter 50 verse 1, the Lord had asked his people, Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away. The Lord had neither utterly cast off his people in divorce, nor had he sold them to some third party to pay his debts. In verse 3 of this chapter, the Lord returns to this point.

There was no third party involved to whom the Lord had to pay her redemption. He would deliver them, without having to pay a debt or ransom to any other party. At the dawn of their history as a nation, Israel had been delivered from the oppression at the time of Egypt, where they had freely gone to sojourn in the time of Joseph.

How much more would the Lord deliver his people when they were forcibly taken by foreign powers like Assyria and Babylon, against their will, and not in payment of any debt that the Lord owed those nations? To the watching peoples and rulers, it might appear that the Lord had been outmatched by rival gods. They had destroyed his temple and stripped him of his people, leading them all to blaspheme his name. The Lord, however, will vindicate his name against all such adversaries, proving his name to his people and the watching world.

Monotheism isn't an abstract theological proposition, but a truth that will be demonstrated on the stage of history. This section is concluded in verses 7-12 with a moving poetic portrayal of Zion's redemption. The watchmen in the hard-pressed city desperately scan the horizon, hoping for signs of relief.

Suddenly one of them raises his voice to the others, pointing out a figure, faintly visible on one of the hillsides facing the city, running towards them. As this figure approaches, they recognize that the man is one of their heralds. He is bringing tidings of their deliverance, of the victory of their god over their adversaries.

As he nears the gate of the city, perhaps he waves his arms and calls out to the eager watchmen, telling them the joyful news, your god reigns. The watchmen erupt in joyful shouts and songs, spreading the glad news to the entire city. The city, once devastated but now released, is invited to join in the song.

The Lord's sovereignty has been publicly demonstrated in his deliverance of them and the overthrowing of all of their oppressors. He has, "...bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations", as verse 10 puts it. All this recalls chapter 40 verses 9-11, where a similar scene is described.

Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up, fear not.

Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and

his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

The scene is portrayed from the vantage point of Zion, but the exiles of the people are also addressed in verses 11 and 12. These verses recall chapter 48 verses 20 and 21. He made water flow for them from the rock.

He split the rock, and the water gushed out. The exiles are exhorted to leave the land of their exile and to return, in a new Exodus-like event. Their return would not be a desperate flight, however, from a pursuing adversary, as in the departure from Egypt.

While there would be similarities to the Exodus, in their enjoyment of the protection and presence of the Lord, they would be a peaceful and joyful procession, returning to the land with no enemies threatening to harm them. In the concluding three verses of this chapter, the fourth and by most reckonings the final of the Servant Songs begins. It is here that the figure of the Servant comes into clearest view.

The introduction, Behold my Servant, is the same as that of chapter 42 verse 1. The Servant is one in whom the Lord's hand will be revealed. Through him the Lord will demonstrate his sovereignty. The Servant is also the true messenger of the Lord, the one who attends to the Lord, and speaks his words wisely and faithfully.

This passage concerning the Servant begins by speaking of his exaltation. Although the path to exaltation will pass through the deepest suffering and mistreatment, he would be lifted up at the last. The Servant would astonish everyone.

While one might expect the anointed Servant of the Lord to have the charm and beauty of David, the Servant is disfigured and disgraced, not someone who seems, in the depths of his humiliation, to be marked out for his exaltation. The term that the ESV translates as Sprinkle in verse 15 has been rendered as startles by many commentators, underlining the surprise and astonishment that the figure of the Servant provokes in these verses. Goldengay, however, argues that we should understand it as spattering.

The spattering of the nations might be related to the expiation that the Servant will accomplish. The Servant would be an epiphany for the rulers of the nations, an unveiling of the Lord's purpose and arm, leading them to stand in an awestruck silence at the majesty of the Lord and the greatness of his deliverance wrought through this Servant. A question to consider, how is the image of the herald of good tidings in this chapter and in chapter 40 taken up in the New Testament? Luke 12.54-13.9 He also said to the crowds, When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, A shower is coming, and so it happens.

And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, There will be scorching heat, and it

happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.

There was some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, and he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell, and kill them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And he told this parable, A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none.

And he said to the vinedresser, Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure.

Then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down. In the concluding verses of Luke chapter 12, Jesus observes that people can read meteorological signs, but they can't recognize the times in which they are living.

It's imperative that they learn to interpret the present time, to see the signs. The immediate signs in that context are those of the divisions and families mentioned in verses 52-53. These foreshadow what's going to happen in the future, this great division of judgment.

The Son of Man is going to come, and they won't be prepared for his advent. From speaking of interpreting the signs, Jesus moves to speaking of judging what is right. The theme of judgment is important here.

Recognizing the signs, they should appreciate that they are hastening towards the time of reckoning. A similar image to the one that Jesus uses here is found in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21-26, when it is related to the commandment not to murder. But here it seems to have a different purpose.

In speaking about settling with the accuser, Jesus is making a different claim in this context. Jesus calls his hearers to make every attempt to settle with their adversary before being brought to judgment. They should recognize the signs of imminent judgment in Jesus' ministry and get right with God before his judgment falls.

As in the case of previous interruptions, such as the man from the crowd in chapter 12

verse 13 or Peter in verse 41 of that chapter, Jesus takes the statements of those bringing up the actions of Pilate as a springboard for developing his discourse. The people whose blood was mingled with the sacrifices were Galileans, a fact that is repeated three times. This brutal act on Pilate's part isn't recorded elsewhere, but it is in keeping with other things that history records of Pilate.

Jesus, of course, is another Galilean whose blood will be shed as a sacrifice by Pilate, so maybe there's something going on there. The warning that they will all likewise perish is probably looking forward to the events of literal judgment that will come upon Jerusalem in AD 70, where the blood of the slain will fill the temple and where there will also be falling masonry. In discussing these two events then, Jesus is highlighting some of the signs of their own times, signs that point to a judgment that is far more serious to come, a judgment that will fall upon the nation more generally, not just upon a few individuals within it.

Jesus speaks of the 18 people who died in the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, which is an interesting detail because the woman in verses 11 and 16 had 18 years of an infirmity. While I am unsure of the significance of this particular unusual number, at the very least it might serve to connect these two stories together. When we see disaster befalling some other person, self-righteousness and our temptation to explain events neatly tempts us to attribute negative outcomes to things that people did wrong and positive outcomes to things that people did right.

But Jesus stresses that the Galileans and the 18 in the Tower of Siloam couldn't be distinguished from others in such a manner. Others in Galilee and others in Jerusalem are every bit as worthy of perishing in such a manner. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the fig tree serves more explicitly as a symbol for the nation of Israel.

Jesus here seems to be the patient keeper of the vineyard, seeking to delay judgment upon the nation and its temple. Here the fig tree faces imminent destruction, but it is only the mercy of the vine dresser that allows it to remain, and only for a few years longer. If it doesn't bear proper fruit, it will be destroyed.

The parable, of course, would remind people of Isaiah chapter 5 and the song of the vineyard. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1-7 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. God's mercy allows Israel to hold on for now but if they do not produce fruit soon destruction is imminent. A question to consider what are some notable signs of cultural decline and imminent judgment to which we should be alert.