

# OpenTheo

## December 3rd: Isaiah 46 & Luke 10:1-24

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Bel bows down; Nebo stoops. Sending out the seventy-two.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 46. carry you, I have made, and I will bear, I will carry, and will save. To whom will you liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god.

Then they fall down and worship. They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there, it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble.

Remember this, and stand firm. Recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things of old.

For I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is none like me. Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.

Calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country, I have

spoken, and I will bring it to pass. I have purposed, and I will do it. Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness.

I bring near my righteousness. It is not far off, and my salvation will not delay. I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.

At the heart of the argument of chapters 40-55 of Isaiah, the most sustained and powerful argument for monotheism in the Old Testament, is the uniqueness of the Lord over against all of the claims of the idols of the nations. It is important to recognize here that the point of the prophecy is not the more abstract claim that there is only one God, but that the Lord alone is God. The gods of the nations and their idols are nothing.

The Lord is unique as the Creator, as the Master of history, and His uniqueness and supremacy will be so manifested in history that all will have to acknowledge Him as God over all. All of His supposed rivals will be shown to be no gods at all, and utterly humiliated. We might here think back to other events within the history of Israel.

One of the effects of the plagues during the exodus from Egypt was to demonstrate the Lord's supremacy and power in each of the realms of which the Egyptian gods were supposed to be the Lord's. Likewise in 1 Samuel chapter 5, when the Ark of the Covenant was taken into captivity by the Philistines, it was placed in the temple of Dagon their god as a sort of prize, supposedly demonstrating the supremacy of the Philistine god over the god of the Israelites. However, Dagon's idol ended up falling prostrate before the Ark of the Covenant, and after they had raised it up again, it fell over once more, its head and its arms breaking off.

Here once again the Lord is declaring and demonstrating His supremacy over the gods and the false idols. In chapter 41 the Lord summoned the nations for a trial, in which the competing claims of the gods were to be tested. Israel are the witnesses of the Lord's power and sovereignty, and can, even as they suffer for their sinful rebellion, testify to the fact that He foretold what was to occur long in advance, and that now it is coming to pass.

The chapter begins with a depiction of the false gods and their idols. They are seemingly bowing in humiliation, being taken away as a burden upon animals as they have been defeated. Bel means Lord and refers to the chief of the gods.

Its meaning was similar to that of Baal, a title originally used of the god Enlil. It came to apply to Marduk instead. The connection between Marduk and Bel can be seen in Jeremiah chapter 50 verse 2. As in Jeremiah, the defeat of the city of Babylon is seen as a humiliation of its gods, and the taking of the idols is another form of humiliation of them.

As the idols had come to stand for the false gods with the worship that was accorded

them, so in the humbling and removal of the idols, the gods themselves would be humbled. Nebo was another important god, the son of Marduk, and the importance of these two gods can be seen in the way that many of the Neo-Babylonian emperors were named after them. Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus and evil Merodac all had these gods as parts of their names.

Perhaps we could see the bowing of these idols as related in some way to the bowing of the idolaters in chapter 45 verse 23, where the Lord declares that every knee will bow to him. These false gods and idols have become a burden to be borne by their worshippers. Far from actually bearing the burdens of their people, they themselves have just become more weight to be carried away into captivity.

This could not contrast more with the Lord's relationship with his people. The house of Jacob has been borne by the Lord from their first origins, and the Lord will continue to bear them for the rest of their existence. He is the one that made them, and he is also the one who will redeem them.

Once again the Lord underlines the point in words similar to those found at several other points in this trial against the gods. To whom will you liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? Once again the Lord speaks of the manner of the idol's construction, the materials of which they are made, and the ways in which they are set up. The manner in which the idol has to be carted around and then lifted up and set in its place is an illustration of how helpless the gods are to bear those that worship them.

Their images must be borne around by their worshippers. They cannot bear up their worshippers in the time of their distress. Once again the Lord's declaration of his uniqueness, followed by a polemic against the gods and their images, is followed by a summing up of the argument, calling the people to remember who God is, and their relationship to him.

Once again the people are to take confidence in the fact the Lord can declare what is to take place before it has happened. There is no other god like him. His supreme authority stretches from the dawn of creation itself, and his purposes will stand to the end.

As in a number of the other points of this trial against the gods, the Lord's stirring up of Cyrus is seen as evidence of his supremacy and his authority in history. Chapter 41, verses 2-3 Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings under foot. He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

He pursues them and passes on safely. By paths his feet have not trod. The message of this chapter is addressed to a people who are unfaithful, a stubborn and rebellious people who are said to be far from righteousness.

The meaning of the term righteousness in verse 12 is most typically understood in relationship to the righteousness spoken of in verse 13, the righteousness that, in contrast to that which seems far off in verse 12, is brought near. This righteousness is the righteousness of the Lord, the salvation that he brings in fulfilment of his covenant, setting the world to rights. This could be taken either in a literal sense, that they are not experiencing the salvation of the Lord because of their unbelief, or in an ironic sense, that they think themselves far away from the Lord's righteousness, but the Lord's righteousness and salvation is in fact near at hand.

John Oswald, unpersuaded by these readings, argues that it is more likely to refer to the fact that they are not righteous in believing the Lord. This then is a reference to their faithlessness, not to the distance, whether seeming or real, of the Lord's salvation from them. In this way it might be a contrast between the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant and his commitment to set things to rights, and the deep unfaithfulness of the people and the fact that far from setting things to rights, they are committed to injustice.

However, the Lord's salvation does not ultimately depend upon the faithfulness of his people. Out of the Lord's unilateral initiative, the Lord is going to bring about his salvation. He is going to re-establish Jerusalem and the nation for his glory.

All of this will be for his own namesake, as a demonstration of his character before the eyes of the nations. A question to consider. The specific gods, Bel and Nebo, are mentioned in this chapter, not just the generic gods and idols that have been mentioned in previous ones.

Where else in scripture do we see the humiliation of specific gods that are mentioned within the text? What might we learn more generally about the place that the false gods and their idols have within the larger story of redemption? Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the Harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go your way. Behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.

Carry no money bag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, Peace be to this house, and if a son of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him, but if not, it will return to you. And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the labourer deserves his wages.

Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick in it, and say to them, The kingdom of God has come near to you.

But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near. I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Besseder! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.

The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me. The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name. And he said to them, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Then turning to the disciples he said privately, Blessed are the eyes that see what you see, for I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

In Luke chapter 10 Jesus sends out the seventy-two, much as the twelve were sent out at the beginning of chapter 9. Here, however, they function as a sort of an advance party. They go before him into all of the towns that he is going to visit on his way towards Jerusalem. Jesus is very slowly advancing towards Jerusalem, and like an army gradually moving down through the land, he sends disciples in twos ahead of him.

In some texts the number of disciples is seventy. In other texts, such as the ESV which we're using, there are seventy-two. What are we to make of the numbers? First of all, if it's seventy, we can think of the seventy nations of the world in Genesis chapter 10, representing all of humanity.

Seventy people go down with Jacob into Egypt in Genesis chapter 46 verses 26 to 27. Jesus, the new Jacob, has twelve disciples as Jacob had twelve sons, and seventy more in the wider body of his family. There were seventy elders of Israel who received Moses' spirit in Numbers chapter 11.

It could also relate to the number of people in the Great Sanhedrin. The choosing and empowering of the seventy represents Christ's formation of a new Israel and a new polity. But then there seem to be two more, which presents some problems for those

connections if it is indeed correct.

So what to make of this? First, you might argue that some of the connections with seventy would still pertain, but much more loosely. Yet it is curious to notice that on a couple of occasions where there is this connection with the number seventy, you also have the number seventy-two connected in some traditions. So first of all, there are two extra people in Numbers 11.

There are the seventy elders, but there are these two, Eldad and Medad, who are in the camp, who are separate from them. A number of people using slightly different criteria have counted the number of the nations in Genesis chapter 10 slightly differently, making seventy-two by some reckonings. Also, seventy nations plus Edom and Israel make seventy-two.

By some traditions, seventy scholars produced the Septuagint. By other traditions, it was seventy-two. So a curious uncertainty about whether a number is seventy or seventy-two is common to a number of important instances.

Perhaps there is something more to be explored here. Of course, seventy-two is six times twelve. They could be seen as an expansion of the twelve, but they could also be seen as, with the twelve, forming a group of eighty-four.

Now, Luke has already used the number eighty-four in reference to the age of Anna, and eighty-four is seven times twelve. There is a sort of fullness represented here. Note also that the number of disciples prior to the day of Pentecost is one hundred and twenty, again an expansion upon the number twelve.

The reference here to the harvest might look back to the seed-sowing mentioned a few chapters earlier. Maybe we should see the twelve sent out earlier, in chapter 9 verses 1-6, as sowers, and the seventy functioning more as reapers. There is a much greater emphasis upon judgment associated with the ministry of the seventy, which might relate to this.

They gather the wheat, but bring down judgment upon the chaff. They are sent out in a very similar way to the twelve. They are sent out with instructions that suggest both the urgency of their mission and also their dependence upon the people that they are being sent to to provide for them.

The sending of the twelve and the seventy might also recall the spying out of the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua. There are hints there that they are sent out in pairs too. Twelve spies were sent to spy out the Promised Land, representing the whole of Israel, and now the sending out of the twelve, followed by seventy-two, suggests another representation of Israel as they spy out the land.

But these spies bring back a good report. A connection is drawn between the reception

of the seventy disciples and the final judgment. We can maybe think about Matthew chapter 25 verses 31-46 and the sheep and the goats.

The division there occurs on the basis of their reception of the brothers of Christ. The brothers are the disciples, the emissaries that are sent out representing their Lord. It isn't merely about a general attitude towards people in need.

This isn't what that passage is about. The passage is rather about the reception of the prophet. However, the disciples are sent without great provisions.

They depend upon the hospitality of the places to which they go, and the test that is being provided to these places is a test of hospitality. The way that these places will or will not receive the prophet is very similar to the way that they will or will not receive the poor. Such inspections of cities remind us perhaps of the story of Sodom in chapter 19 of Genesis, also of the story of the two spies going to Jericho in the story of Rahab in the book of Joshua.

The way that the towns received Jesus' 72 brethren would weigh in their final fate. You can think about the way Sodom is described in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 48-50. In the story of Sodom there is a great juxtaposition between chapters 18 and 19.

The hospitality of Abraham to the angels and the Lord unawares in chapter 18, and the way that that is juxtaposed with the story of Lot's hospitality to the angels and the inhospitality of the people of Sodom. A failure to receive the messengers of the Lord is connected with a failure to receive the poor and the needy more generally. So it should come as no surprise to us that the 72 are sent as people who are dependent upon the hospitality of the cities and the towns that they are visiting.

Jesus challenges the cities that he has performed most of his works in to that point. On account of God's great work within their midst and their rejection of it, they are preparing themselves for a far greater judgment. Capernaum for instance sought to be lifted up to heaven but it will be brought down to Sheol.

Jesus' statement here is playing off the background of Isaiah chapter 14 verses 12 to 15. Once again in verses 17 to 20 the theme of heavenly conflict comes to the foreground. The disciples are engaged in a battle with demonic forces which are being driven back by their work.

Jesus' vision probably refers to something that has not yet occurred. It's an anticipation of what will occur through his death, resurrection, ascension and the ministry of the church following Pentecost. We might consider Revelation chapter 12 in light of this.

The greater defeat of Satan would result from events that are being put in motion with the spying out of the land here. The emphasis upon conflict with Satan and his demons makes clear that Israel is his occupied territory. The primary enemy is not Rome, it's

Satan.

This all sets things up for Jesus' prayer to his father. Verse 21 is a profoundly Trinitarian verse. The son rejoices in the Holy Spirit and addresses the father.

The father as the lord of heaven and earth is the one who reveals and hides. He hides truth from the proud who imagine themselves to be wise and he reveals things to the weakest and the humblest. All authority has already been given to Christ.

He is the one who passes on all that the father has given him and apart from him there is no access to it. A question to consider. The eschatological and spiritual horizons of reality are very prominent in this passage.

Behind the ministry of the 72 Jesus shows the horizon of this great battle with Satan himself and shows the horizon of the last day looming over these cities. How might we better recognize the interrelation between the horizons that are most immediate to us and the horizons of the age to come and the horizon of conflict with spiritual forces?