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Cyrus, the Lord's anointed. Leave the dead to bury their own dead.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 45. I am the Lord, and there is no other. Besides me there is no God.

I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness.

I make well-being and create calamity. I am the Lord, who does all these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness.

Let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit. Let the earth cause them both to sprout. I, the Lord, have created it.

Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots. Does the clay say to him who forms it, What are you making? or Your work has no handles. Woe to him who says to a father, What are you begetting? or to a woman, With what are you in labour? Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and the One who formed him, Ask me of things to come.

Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands? I made the earth and created man on it. It was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have stirred him up in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level.

He shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the Lord of hosts. Thus says the Lord, the wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabians, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours. They shall follow you.

They shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying, Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no God besides Him. Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.

All of them are put to shame and confounded. The makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation.

You shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity. For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens, He is God, who formed the earth and made it. He established it, He did not create it empty, He formed it to be inhabited.

I am the Lord, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness. I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, Seek me in vain.

I the Lord speak the truth, I declare what is right. Assemble yourselves and come. Draw near together, you survivors of the nations.

They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a God that cannot save. Declare and present your case. Let them take counsel together.

Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour. There is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth.

For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return. To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.

Only in the Lord it shall be said of me, a righteousness and strength. To him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.

These chapters of Isaiah are an extended challenge to the gods of the idolatrous nations, a trial in which the claims of the gods to be gods are being tested. The Lord declares Himself to be unique and supreme, the sole creator, the Lord of history and the redeemer of his people. His people are witnesses of his mastery of history, as they can

testify to the way in which he has declared future events long before and that his word and purpose have stood firm.

None of the so-called gods of the nations can do this. As part of the argument of the preceding chapter, the Lord demystified the idols, unveiling them to be mere creations of frail mortals, made of just wood, stone and metal, utterly unworthy of the worship that they were being given. Indeed, to worship such idols of man's fashioning as if they were gods is a gross abomination, rendering to such objects what only truly belongs to God himself, and implying that the eternal, immortal and glorious creator and Lord of all could be fittingly represented by mean mockeries of men's hands.

Chapter 44 ended with a statement of the Lord's manifest sovereignty in history through the work of Qoresh, Cyrus, whom the Lord appointed to deliver his people from exile and return them to Jerusalem, which Cyrus would order to be rebuilt along with its temple. As we discussed in chapter 44, the reference to Cyrus in this context is one of the reasons why many commentators dispute the claim that chapters 40-66 should be dated to the time of Isaiah the son of Amoz. While for some this has been on account of their refusal to believe in predictive prophecy, others doubt that such a prophecy, mentioning the name of Cyrus in such a manner, makes good sense well over a century before his birth, and 160 years before the prophecy was fulfilled.

No one would know who this Cyrus was. Typically prophecies of figures and events so far in the future are delivered in less specific language. Some respond to this problem by arguing that the name of Cyrus might have been added to the prophecy of Isaiah later, when it became clear that he was the man in which the prophecy would be fulfilled, while others suggest that such prophecies were given through someone other than Isaiah, likely sometime in the 540s BC, in the years leading up to Cyrus' invasion of Babylon.

Perhaps the most surprising features of Cyrus as described at the end of chapter 44 and beginning of chapter 45 are the terms applied to him. Chapter 44 verse 28 speaks of him as the Lord's appointed shepherd, language typically associated with the king who would fulfill his purpose. Here in chapter 45, Cyrus is arrestingly spoken of in language that we would associate with the awaited Davidic king, as the Lord's anointed, literally as the Messiah.

The Lord has expressly appointed Cyrus for the purpose of releasing his people and re-establishing Jerusalem and its temple. The Lord is going to use Cyrus in a remarkable way, grasping his right hand to empower him and subduing nations before him. Loosening the loins of kings might perhaps refer to the disarming involved in removing the belts bearing the king's weapons from around their waists.

Another possibility is that it refers to the kings soiling themselves in fear. Strong cities would not be able to withstand Cyrus, their gates would be opened before him or broken

through. The Lord would use Cyrus for the sake of his people, even though Cyrus did not know the Lord.

While Cyrus does refer to the Lord in his decree for the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, there is no evidence that he was a believer in the Lord. Presumably he regarded the Lord as one of the many gods of the nations. However, whatever Cyrus' understanding, the Lord is using him to accomplish his purpose, to demonstrate his concern for his people and his supremacy over all of the false gods of the nations.

Cyrus is named and set apart for a divine purpose, much as Israel is, but Cyrus is not aware of how the Lord is using him. The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord and the Lord moves it in whatever way he wants. This all serves to display the glory and uniqueness of the Lord to the watching world.

Verse 7 declares the Lord's power both in the world of nature and in the events of history. The Lord is behind and over all of these things, whether the light and darkness of the first day of creation or the corresponding well-being and calamity of the events of human history. The Lord summons the rain of righteousness from the heaven and the answering fruitfulness of the earth, all revealing his sovereign and gracious work.

The sovereignty of the Lord in fashioning his people and enacting his purposes is illustrated on several occasions in scripture by the image of the potter, the pot and the clay of which he forms it. As in Romans 9 or Jeremiah 18, the Lord's message concerns the futility and the presumption of the people fashioned by his hand, objecting to the one that's fashioning them. In addition to being the maker of heaven and earth, the Lord is also the maker of his people with his own purpose for them.

The Lord has both the prerogative and the power to order all things. He will declare what is to come to pass and what shall become the people that he has fashioned, and no one is in any position to command him otherwise. The stirring up of Cyrus is the great potter fashioning clay for his purposes, using the unpromising material of the pagan king as the deliverer of his people.

This purpose will be achieved in the most surprising of ways, without the payment of either ransom or tribute. Cyrus would act in this way simply because the Lord stirred him up to do so. Such language of the Lord stirring up Cyrus is found elsewhere in chapter 41 verse 2 for instance.

Who stirred up one from the east, whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot. He makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow. It is also used of Cyrus in Ezra and elsewhere.

The work that the Lord would accomplish through Cyrus was a demonstration of his own

righteousness, his faithfulness to his covenant, his inaction of his justice, and his setting of the world to rights. The Lord is going to demonstrate his supremacy over all of the idols and false gods. When he does so, the nations will see and be put to shame in their idolatry.

However, it will also be a moment of redemption, as people of all the nations humbled themselves before and sought to come under the rule of Israel, recognising that the Lord was in Israel's midst. This is clearly not something that occurred in any full sense in the years following the return from Babylon. Rather, we can probably see here something of the greater awaited horizon of salvation, one foretold at several points in the book of Isaiah, which often has what some call telescopic prophecies, which can collapse future events at several different distances of time into a single projected future.

The uniqueness of the Lord would be a publicly manifest fact, not a secret, but the incontrovertible reality evidenced by history. Former idolaters would recognise the transcendence of the Lord, that he is a God who hides himself, but also his nearness to those who fear him. He is the God of Israel, the Saviour.

In the revelation of the Lord's truth and glory, the idols of the nations would also be exposed in their emptiness. The continuing trial motif is particularly prominent at the end of the chapter. The survivors of the judged nations are summoned to come together in an assembly.

Even as refugees from their former lands, they are still going around carrying their wooden idols. It should already be amply manifest that they cannot save them. The Lord challenges the idolaters.

Who declared long in advance the events that have come to pass in their recent history? There is no God like the Lord, the unrivalled master of history. But he is not merely the master of the destinies of the nations. He presents himself as their saviour too.

If they will but turn to him, whether they be at the very ends of the earth, he will save them too. The demonstration of the uniqueness of the Lord will come as every human being recognises that he is the Lord. Whether they bow unwillingly as defeated foes or as loving subjects, all will bow.

Every tongue will swear allegiance to him. The Lord is the one true source of justice and of might, the one who will establish his righteous rule in the earth. He will vindicate his servants and put to shame all of his foes.

Righteousness and strength are the key qualities that mark someone out for rule, and the Lord himself is the source of these things, the source of all true sovereignty and rule. It is to him that Israel and the converted of the nations shall look, finding in him, corresponding with his righteousness and strength, justification and true glory. A

question to consider.

In Philippians chapter 2, Paul alludes to verse 23 of this chapter, referring it to Christ. How does Paul's use of Isaiah's expression develop the themes of this chapter and show their surprising fulfilment? Luke chapter 9 verses 51 to 62. When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem, and he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered the village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him.

But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them? But he turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, I will follow you wherever you go.

And Jesus said to him, foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. To another he said, follow me. But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father.

And Jesus said to him, leave the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Yet another said, I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home. Jesus said to him, no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

At the end of Luke chapter 9, we enter a new phase of the gospel. The gospel of Luke can be divided into three sections. There is the section up to Luke chapter 9 verse 50, which concerns the ministry in Galilee, which sets the scene for the beginning of Christ's vocation.

In chapters 9 verse 51 to 19 verse 28, there is the travel and the journey towards Jerusalem. And then from chapter 19 verse 28 onwards, there is the final week in Jerusalem and the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. The journey narrative in Luke is greatly drawn out.

At many points we might forget that we are on a journey, but the journey is very important for understanding what's taking place. Jesus is on the way. He's on the way towards his destiny.

He has set his face towards Jerusalem and he is about to arrive there. And all these things that are taking place are taking place in the shadow of that destination. Travel is a theme within the work of Luke and Acts more generally.

There are larger journey narratives and smaller journey narratives. Some of the smaller journey narratives include the Emmaus road, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul on the road to Damascus. And these journey narratives serve a purpose narratively.

In each of those stories, a physical journey is accompanied by a movement in understanding that ultimately leads to eyes being opened. It leads to the celebration of baptism or the Lord's supper. These are movements in understanding that Luke is using a travel narrative to frame.

There are also larger journey narratives, Paul's missionary journeys, the journey to Jerusalem of Christ, but then also of Paul in the book of Acts. Paul also journeys towards Rome and the shipwreck narrative is a very important part of the structure of the book of Acts. Jesus in the gospel of Luke, to a far greater extent than the other gospels, is presented as a traveling prophet.

Luke is one of the synoptic gospels, so there are lots of commonalities with Matthew and Mark, but there are some very arresting differences in this section. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in this section takes 35% of Luke's gospel narrative in contrast to Matthew where it only has 6% and Mark where it only has 8%. If Matthew accents Jesus as the teacher, the one who's teaching the law, the new Moses perhaps, and Mark represents Jesus as the new David, the king, the one who does everything straight away, who's the man of action, the man who defeats the demons, Luke presents Jesus as the prophet, the man of prayer, the man who wanders from place to place like the prophets did.

The days drew near for him to be taken up. Jesus is looking beyond the cross to the ascension. The cross is facing him, but there's something beyond the cross.

He's going to accomplish his exodus in Jerusalem as he spoke about on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah and Moses. The description of looking forward to that time when he's going to be taken up also draws our mind back to 2nd Kings chapter 2 perhaps and the description of Elijah on the way to be taken up in the chariots of fire into heaven. Jesus makes a determined move towards Jerusalem.

There is a decisive shift here. He sets his face and he is not going to be turned aside. He also sends disciples ahead of him, messengers ahead of him.

In Malachi chapter 3 verse 1, Behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. Behold he is coming says the Lord of hosts. Earlier on in the gospel these words are applied to John the Baptist and here we see the disciples playing a similar role to John the Baptist as Jesus moves towards Jerusalem.

James and John ask whether they should call for fire to come down from heaven as Christ is rejected on the way. In this they imagine themselves to be like the prophet Elijah. Elijah called down fire from heaven to judge people in 2nd Kings chapter 1. Elsewhere in the gospels James and John are described as the sons of thunder and it seems this is a fitting request for the sons of thunder to make for fire to come down from heaven.

Peter's failure is that of being a stumbling stone. Peter is the rock but he can turn into a stumbling stone if he's not careful. In the same way James and John's calling, the way in which they've been set apart by the Lord and renamed by him, is one that comes with dangers.

Their very strength holds possibilities of weakness. Like John the Baptist they seem to be wondering where the promised fire is going to come from. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

When is the judgment coming? What we should be beginning to recognize here though is that Jesus, though he has similarities to Elijah, is not Elijah. The travel material of this gospel is interspersed with discipleship material which is quite fitting. Others must join Jesus on the way.

The movement towards Jerusalem is connected with taking up the cross and following Christ. Christ makes a number of statements here to different people who want to join along the way. Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Foxes have holes may be a reference perhaps to people like Herod, the birds of the air, to the Gentiles within the land. Herod is referred to as a fox in Luke chapter 13 verse 32. And he said to them, go and tell that fox, behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and on the third day I finish my course.

Jesus uses the term Son of Man of himself. This terminology is used from time to time for people outside of the immediate discipleship group. It would draw people's mind back to Daniel.

It would reference suffering. It would also suggest heavenly authority. It's an enigmatic term and maybe it's a challenge not to slot Jesus into an existing category.

Jesus' statement to the man who wants to bury his father first is a surprising and arresting one. Let the dead bury their own dead is a very radical statement. We need not presume that the man's father has just died.

However he might want to do his filial duty first and then follow Jesus at a later point, waiting around for a few years perhaps. However Jesus speaks of that situation as one that is like serving an ongoing cycle of death. Let the dead bury their own dead.

If you're just going to bury your father and then your son's going to bury you, nothing's going to change. He's going to bring resurrection, a change, a bringing of life into a cycle of death. And those who will follow him will be part of breaking that cycle of the dead burying their dead.

The final statement is from someone who wants to go back and say farewell to the

people at his home. Once again Jesus' response is radical, that the man who has put his hand to the plough should not look back. The story of Elijah is once more in the background in 1st Kings chapter 19 verses 19 to 21.

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him and he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said let me kiss my father and my mother and then I will follow you. And he said to him go back again for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of oxen and gave it to the people and they ate.

Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. Once again there is a distinction being drawn between Jesus and Elijah. Jesus' ministry has a much greater urgency than the ministry of Elijah.

A question to consider, how does the sending on of people ahead and the calling of people to follow behind help us to better understand the character of Jesus' movement to Jerusalem here?