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November 28th: Isaiah 41 & Luke 8:1-21

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Fear not, for I am with you. The Parable of the Sower.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 41. Listen to me in silence, O coastlands, let the peoples renew their strength. Let them approach, then let them speak.

Let us together draw near for judgment. 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.

He pursues them and passes on safely. By paths his feet have not trod. Who has performed and done this, Calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, the first and with the last, I am he.

The coastlands have seen and are afraid, The ends of the earth tremble, They have drawn near and come. Everyone helps his neighbour and says to his brother, Be strong. The craftsman strengthens the goldsmith, And he who smooths with the hammer, Him who strikes the anvil.

Saying of the soldering, It is good, and they strengthen it with nails, So that it cannot be

moved. But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, The offspring of Abraham, my friend, You whom I took from the ends of the earth, And called from its farthest corners, Saying to you, You are my servant, I have chosen you, and not cast you off. Fear not, for I am with you.

Be not dismayed, for I am your guard. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Behold, all who are incensed against you Shall be put to shame and confounded.

Those who strive against you shall be as nothing, And shall perish. You shall seek those who contend with you, But you shall not find them. Those who war against you shall be as nothing at all.

For I, the Lord your guard, hold your right hand. It is I who say to you, Fear not, I am the one who helps you. Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel, I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord.

Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. Behold, I make of you a threshing sledge, New, sharp, and having teeth. You shall thresh the mountains and crush them, And you shall make the hills like chaff.

You shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, And the tempest shall scatter them, And you shall rejoice in the Lord. In the Holy One of Israel you shall glory. When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, And their tongue is parched with thirst, I, the Lord, will answer them.

I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, And fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, And the dry land springs of water.

I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane, and the pine together, That they may see and know, may consider and understand together, That the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it. Set forth your case, says the Lord.

Bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, That we may know their outcome, or declare to us the things to come.

Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods. Do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing.

An abomination is he who chooses you. I stirred up one from the north, and he has come, From the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name. He shall trample on rulers as

on mortar, as the potter treads clay.

Who declared it from the beginning, that we might know, And beforehand that we might say, he is right? There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I was the first to say to Zion, behold, here they are, And I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news. But when I look, there is no one.

Among these there is no counsellor who, when I ask, gives an answer. Behold, they are all a delusion. Their works are nothing.

Their metal images are empty wind. After the chapter introducing this new section of the book of Isaiah, chapters 41 to 48 develop the theological themes that we saw in chapter 40, underlining the lordship of God over history, creation, and the nations, and his utterly surpassing greatness over all of the false gods and idols. The theological message of these chapters, their message about God, is one of the most pronounced in the entirety of the Old Testament.

But this is no mere abstract theology. It is truth about God, powerfully and urgently addressed to people caught up in the turmoil of the storms of history. When the vessel of the nation will be stricken on the rocks of hostile imperial powers, its capsized sailors and passengers left flailing in the abyssal deep, their strength gradually being sapped away by the bitter cold of the waters, it would help them to know that their God is the master of the chaotic waters, and he has assured them that, whether in the ship or out of it, he will get his people to his promised shore.

Likewise, when helplessly battered by opposing powers, knowing that they served a God who is greater than all of those powers could not be more essential. Within these chapters, there are recurring legal motifs at play. There is, as it were, a great cosmic trial scene, to which the Lord summons the nations and their gods.

The trial will establish who is the true God and who are false. The entire earth is called to attend the judgment. The coastlands or islands representing the farthest reaches of the nations call to summon up all of their strength.

They are commanded to approach and present their case for assessment of the divine court. The Lord presents evidence in support of his claim to be the one true master of history, the one who has demonstrated his rule within the arena of great human events on the center stage of the affairs of the nations. The identity of the figure stirred up from the east is likely Cyrus, although John Goldengain notes the possibility that the figure in view might be Abraham, an interpretation historically followed by John Calvin and several others, and which would be strengthened by parallels with verses 8 and 9. Cyrus, likely presented in the more general terms here, will come into greater focus in later chapters.

The same language of stirring up will be used of Cyrus in chapter 45 verse 13. 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. Ezra chapter 1 verse 1 also speaks of the Lord stirring up the spirit of Cyrus, as does 2nd Chronicles chapter 36 verse 22. Gary Smith, disagreeing with readings that identify this character either as Cyrus or as Abraham, argues that it is Assyria that is in view here.

The empire that turned many other nations into chaff to be driven away by the wind would face that same fate itself. As such prophecies are very general and figurative, we probably should not be too preoccupied with identifying specific historical reference. Their words can speak powerfully into various contexts.

However, the case for Cyrus as the primary referent does seem to be the strongest to me, especially when we consider how strongly and commonly the notion of the Lord stirring up is associated with him. The expression used of this figure in verse 2 is variously understood. John Oswald argues that it should be rendered Many other commentators and translators interpret the expression differently though, as relating to the victory that meets the one stirred up from the east at every step.

This figure is successful in pursuing his foes. In verse 4, the Lord interrogates the assembled participants in the trial. Who was the one who initiated all of this? In what we might see as an allusion back to the revelation of the divine name at the burning bush in Exodus, the Lord declares that he is the one who did so.

He is the I am. He is the first and the last, a theological expansion of some of the meaning inherent in the divine name. In the last, the Lord brings to effect what he has determined from the first.

His purposes stand certain and sure, beyond the power of men to undermine. Seeing the purpose of the Lord taking effect in history, in this figure from the east, the nations are dismayed and terrified. Verses 5 to 7 look back to verse 1, where the Lord summoned the coastlands to attend, renew their strength, and draw near for judgment.

In verse 5, we see that the coastlands have indeed drawn near and come. Seeing what the Lord is accomplishing in the earth, they are deeply afraid. However, they look to their neighbors and idols for strength, rather than to the Lord.

Yet far from receiving strength from their idols, the idolaters must strengthen the idols, seeking to secure their idols from toppling. The futility of the idolaters is contrasted with the situation of Israel, the chosen people of the Lord, called in their forefather Abraham from the farthest corners of the world. Smith notes a progression in the description of Israel here, from my servant, to the people whom I have chosen, to the offspring of Abraham, to my friend or beloved.

As the servant, they are commissioned to act in the name of the Lord, their master. They were graciously chosen by the Lord to be his people, set apart in their forefathers Jacob and Abraham, as a people of the Lord's own and beloved of the Lord. Israel's standing as beloved of the Lord is a continuation of the Lord's relationship with their forefather Abraham.

They are beloved as his seed. While I don't believe that we should see the one stirred up in the east in verse 2 as Abraham, I do think that the parallels are important to recognize. Cyrus's actions in delivering the people of God from the land of the Chaldeans will be akin to a renewal of the first call of Abraham.

The Lord assures his people of his continued love for them, his personal presence with them, his empowering and upholding of them, and his dismaying and confounding of all of their foes. Punctuating his statements with the charge, Fear not, the hero might recall the pivotal moments in which this expression is used in the Old Testament narrative. For instance, when the Lord cuts a covenant with Abraham in Genesis chapter 15, a covenant confirmed using the same expression with Isaac in chapter 26, or when Moses exhorted the terrified children of Israel at the Red Sea.

The Lord's power, his presence with them, his promises to and good purposes for them are what they need to stand against the nations that would terrify them. All of those adversaries would be put to shame. Smith observes that the description here seems out of keeping with the ways that the Babylonians and Medo-Persians are described relative to Israel during the exilic period, where they are not fighting against Israel.

He suggests that we see this as referring to the Assyrians in 701 BC or the Babylonians in 587 BC. Perhaps this would be better read as a more general statement including such events but also others besides them. While Israel might regard itself as little more than a puny worm before the dragons of the nations, it is the Lord himself who is on their side.

Imagery of harvesting and threshing has been used on several occasions earlier in this book. Here Judah will become the Lord's threshing sledge, a heavy wooden frame with stones and teeth of metal beneath it used to separate the grain from the stalks. All obstacles before them would be broken beneath them as the Lord used them as his instrument.

Their foes would be driven away by the wind and the Lord, described as the Holy One of Israel, a title that pervades the entire book of Isaiah but is rarely found outside of it, would be glorified through it all. The promise of verses 17 to 20 is of the transformation of the barren and dry wilderness into fruitful, verdant and well-watered land. We've already encountered similar promises in chapter 35 verses 1 to 2. And also in verses 6 and 7 of that chapter.

Even though there is no reference here to the Lord bringing people through the

wilderness, many commentators see allusions to a second or new exodus in these verses, perhaps especially in the reference to the opening up of rivers and fountains, much as the Lord provided water for the children of Israel in the desert of Sinai. As Peter Lighthouse notes, there are four locations mentioned here, the high places, the valleys, the wilderness and the dry land, and each has a corresponding form of water provided for it. Rivers on the heights, springs in the valleys, pools in the wilderness, fountains in the dry land.

The trees that the Lord will plant in the wilderness are trees that afford shade more than food. They enable travellers to find relief from the heat of the burning sun. The power of the Lord to render the parched, burning and deserted places green, well-watered and shaded would be a demonstration of his power to those that contemplated it.

In verse 21, we return to the scene with which the chapter began, with the nations assembled as participants in the trial of the gods. The adulterers were condemned earlier in the chapter, but now the false gods whom they worship are the ones being challenged. What account can they provide for themselves? The Lord, as we have seen, declares the future in advance, as the one whose purposes from the very beginning will be realised by his providential power and authority.

Yet the false gods have neither true foresight of the future, nor, more importantly, are their purposes effective in history. If they could really tell what was going to happen afterwards, as those who had power over the course of history, then they would really be terrifying, they would really be gods. But yet they cannot, they are not true gods.

In contrast, the Lord's word did stand, seeing Cyrus come down from the north upon Babylon to take it over. They should see the Lord's word coming into effect. Cyrus, indeed, would invoke the name of the Lord, as we see in Ezra chapter 1, verses 2 to 4. Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place, with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

Cyrus would trample down many great rulers, and through him the Lord would demonstrate his sovereignty. The Lord declared his good news of deliverance of Jerusalem, long before it took effect. Can any of the idols of the nations do the same? No, they cannot.

They are empty. They are worthless. They are utterly powerless to deliver those that

worship them.

The Lord alone is the true God and master of history. Before his work, all the idols and false gods of the nations are struck down. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in the description of the decree of Cyrus and its aftermath that the scripture underlines the fact that the Lord was behind it all? Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 21 Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Cusa, Hera's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means.

When a great crowd was gathering, and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil, and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As he said these things, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. Now the parable is this, The seed is the word of God, the ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root, they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. No one after lighting a lamp, covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.

Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away. Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And

he was told, Your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to see you.

But he answered them, My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. In Luke chapter 8 we learn that Jesus' ministry was supported by faithful women, in much the same way as the ministry of people like Elisha. In 2nd Kings chapter 4 verses 8-10 we read of Elisha, One day Elisha went on to Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to eat some food.

So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food, and she said to her husband, Behold now, I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small room on the roof with walls, and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us he can go in there. These women also seemed to have accompanied Jesus and his disciples as they travelled around.

While the focus is usually upon the twelve, Luke wants us to know that they were only some of a larger group, and that the women played an indispensable role, and not just as witnesses to the death and resurrection, in the earlier part of Jesus' ministry too. We see many women in the life of the early church involved in aspects of its ministry, as patronesses of churches, as those who hosted churches, as those who performed works of service. Within the cultural context, having women accompanying around a peripatetic teacher like Jesus would have been very surprising, and maybe even scandalous to some.

Jesus delivered these women from evil spirits and illnesses, and they ministered to his material needs. Joel Green observes, His graciousness toward these women is not repaid by their benefactions, rather his graciousness is mirrored in theirs. In the twelve and these women, we also get a sense of the type of group that is forming around Jesus.

One of the features of the gospel portrayal of women is their concern for the presence and the body of Jesus. Here they minister to his needs. In the preceding chapter we have a woman who washes his feet with her tears, and dries them with her hair.

Mary bears the body of Christ in her womb. Women are the ones who follow Christ to the cross, to the tomb, and then are the first to visit on the day of resurrection. Their recognition of the importance of Christ's body and his presence is something that seems to be far more pronounced in them than in the male disciples.

Jesus here delivers the parable of the sower. There are four types of soil, with different responses to the seed that is sown in them. Seed along the path, consumed by the birds.

Seed on rocky ground, without much soil and scorched by the sun. Seed among thorns, choked by those thorns. And then finally, seed on good ground, yielding a hundredfold crop.

Following this, Jesus explains his use of parables. Parables are found at various occasions in the Old Testament, that are often used by prophets as a form of prophetic discourse. Symbolic stories that open up something about a reality, while also hiding it from many people.

The kingdom of God is a secret. It's known only by those to whom it has been given to know it. Jesus is following in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets, who are cryptically revealing God's purposes.

Parables are not illustrations, but they're more like cryptic riddles, designed to hide prophetic mysteries from the unfaithful, yet reveal them to the remnant. Speaking in parables and riddles was a form of judgment upon a people without spiritual perception. This is in part to fulfill the judgment spoken of by Isaiah, in a passage that is very prominent in the New Testament, Isaiah chapter 6. It's where Isaiah sees the vision of God, and he has given his calling, his mission, to a people that will not hear, who will not understand, and who will be judged.

The passage speaks of a catastrophic judgment upon the people, but there will be a remnant. A holy seed will be the stump. And the quotation of Isaiah chapter 6 verse 9 in verse 10 is a very significant gesture towards what is a central theme in the Luken material.

In Acts chapter 28, verse 26 to 28, that verse concludes and sums up Luke's entire narrative. God sows his people in the land in the return from exile, Isaiah chapter 61 verse 11, for as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations. Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 27, behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast.

Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 9 to 10, for behold I am with you and I will turn to you and you shall be tilled and sown and I will multiply people on you, the whole house of Israel, all of it. The city shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt. Hosea chapter 2 verses 21 to 23, and in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine and the oil and they shall answer Jezreel and I will sow her for myself in the land and I will have mercy on no mercy and I will say to not my people, you are my people.

He shall say, you are my God. Jesus is describing what the restoration looks like. This is a sowing that occurs by the word.

Isaiah chapter 55 verses 10 to 13, for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace, the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress, instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. NT Wright suggests that the parable of the sower should be read as the climax and recapitulation of Israel's story. In the sense of a climax, it presents the history of Israel as a story of successive sowings, of differing success and duration, leading up to the great kingdom sowing which Christ is undertaking in his own day.

In the sense of recapitulation, it presents all of these different responses to the word of God sowing a restored people as occurring within Jesus' own ministry. Jesus' ministry won't meet with a universally positive response, but the word of the kingdom that re-sows a restored Israel will receive mixed responses. A lamp is not brought in to be hidden.

Things secret are to be brought to light and things hidden to be revealed. Jesus is speaking in a hidden way at the moment, but ultimately things will be brought to light. It will be made known what he is saying.

We must act accordingly. Our actions right now, the measure that we use with others, will have consequences. Our passage ends with a visit from Jesus' family and it raises the question of who the insiders are.

Who are the outsiders? Jesus isn't just an independent teacher and exorcist, but he's forming a people around him. Jesus challenges the supposed claims of his natural family upon him. Just as the temple was his father's house back in chapter 2, so his true family are those who hear and obey God's word.

A question to consider, how might Jesus' statement about his mother and his brothers and Luke's reference to the twelve and his description of the women who provided for Jesus' material needs be brought into fruitful conversation? What might we learn from the connection between the two?