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November 24th: Isaiah 37 & Luke 6:20-38

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The Lord delivers Jerusalem from the Assyrians. The Sermon on the Plain.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 37. As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shevna the secretary, and the senior priest covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz.

They said to him, Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace. Children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It may be that the Lord your God will hear the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard.

Therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left." When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, Say to your master, Thus says the Lord, Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land. The Rabshakeh returned and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libna, for he had

heard that the king had left Lachish.

Now the king heard concerning Ter-Hekeh king of Kush, he has set out to fight against you. And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah saying, Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah. Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.

Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction, and shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Talasar? Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sephorveim, the king of Hina, or the king of Ivar? Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it. And Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth.

You have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear. Open your eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God.

Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations in their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone, therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone are the Lord. Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib, king of Assyria, this is the word that the Lord has spoken concerning him.

She despises you, she scorns you, the virgin daughter of Zion. She wags her head behind you, the daughter of Jerusalem. Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? By your servants you have mocked the Lord, and you have said, With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest.

I dug wells and drank waters, to dry up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it has grown. I know you are sitting down, and you are going out and coming in, and you are raging against me, because you have raged against me, and your complacency has come to my ears.

I will put my hook in your nose, and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came, and this shall be the sign for you. This year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that. Then in the third year sow and reap and plant vineyards and eat their fruit, and the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward, for out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come down into this city, or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the Lord.

For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake, and for the sake of my servant David. And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home, and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adramalek and Shariza his sons struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.

Isaiah chapter 37 continues the account that began in chapter 36. Sennacherib the king of Assyria invaded Judah and sent his representative the Rapshakei to confront king Hezekiah and his men. Sennacherib successfully overthrew 46 cities of Judah.

Hezekiah had paid Sennacherib a great amount in tribute, hoping that he would call off his invasion before he overthrew Jerusalem too. However that plan had failed and now Sennacherib was expecting Jerusalem to surrender to him. Chapters 36 to 39 of the book of Isaiah are largely identical to chapters 18 to 20 of 2 Kings.

Both sets of chapters narrate the events of 701 BC and also Hezekiah's illness and restoration and the visit of the Babylonian envoys. The question of which of these two texts should be given the priority has been debated by many scholars. These are not the only chapters of 2 Kings that are largely repeated at some point in the prophetic material.

Jeremiah chapter 52 seems to be largely drawn from 2 Kings chapter 25. The account of 2 Kings includes some details that are not found in the account of Isaiah. In particular chapter 18 verses 14 to 16 and Hezekiah's payment of tribute is not found in the account of Isaiah.

King Hezekiah's payment of tribute is also confirmed by Sennacherib's prism found on the site of a palace at Nineveh in 1830. Sennacherib's prism confirms and also fills out

some of the details of the biblical account. In support of Isaiah's account being the original one, we might observe the parallels between earlier chapters in the book and this one.

In particular chapters 7 to 9 and the events surrounding the Syro-Ephraimite crisis during the reign of King Ahaz, during which time Isaiah also addressed the king. Both accounts mention the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field. Both of the kings are told not to fear.

Both are given a sign and we have the repeated expression the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. This expression is also used in chapter 9 verse 7. The effect of all of this is to juxtapose the two kings and the two invasions that they experienced. In both of the two crises there is the question of where their dependence will be upon the Lord of hosts or in looking to foreign nations.

In such a manner the position of this text within the larger book of Isaiah furthers some of the core themes within the book of Isaiah more generally. At this point there is little that Hezekiah and Judah can do to resist the Assyrian invasion. They have lost most of their fortified cities.

They cannot muster a large military force. Egypt does not promise to be an effective or reliable ally. The Assyrians are seemingly not satisfied with the payment of tribute.

And it seems most likely that Judah and Jerusalem will suffer the same fate as the northern kingdom and its capital Samaria had in 722 BC. The message delivered by the Rabshakeh in the previous chapter is brought to King Hezekiah by his officials. Hezekiah is quite understandably deeply dismayed but his response here is the right one.

He turns to the Lord, tears his clothes, goes to the temple of the Lord and then sends messengers to Isaiah the prophet of the Lord. King Hezekiah describes the situation to the prophet Isaiah as akin to the situation of a woman in labour who is trying to bring herself to birth but lacks the strength to do so. He reports the claims of the Rabshakeh and his master the king of Assyria to Isaiah presenting them as not only a challenge to his own reign as the king of Judah but also as a challenge to the Lord's own honour.

The king of Assyria has mocked the living God. He has claimed that the Lord is not able to deliver his people and indeed that the king of Assyria was sent by the Lord to attack the people of Judah. Hezekiah requests the prayers of Isaiah on their behalf.

The Lord responds then to King Hezekiah through Isaiah in a message paralleled and contrasted with the message of the Rabshakeh. The servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed the Lord. Hezekiah should not be afraid of the Rabshakeh's words as the Lord will act against Assyria and on behalf of his people.

The Lord promises Hezekiah deliverance, a deliverance that would have required

considerable faith to believe under the circumstances. All of the signs seem to be pointing against them. When the Rabshokeh returns, he finds that the king of Assyria has left Lachish and is fighting against Libna.

Then Sennacherib the king of Assyria hears a rumour concerning the king of Cush who has set out to fight him. Ter-Hekeh was probably not the king at this time but the crown prince, around 20 years of age. During the 25th dynasty, Egypt was ruled over by Cushites.

Once again Sennacherib sends messengers to Hezekiah in Jerusalem. He directs Hezekiah's attention to the many lands that he has subdued. He had defeated their peoples and their gods were not able to save them.

The Lord, the God of Judah, he argues, will be no different. Hezekiah's response, once again, is to turn to the Lord. He takes the letter, spreads it out before the Lord and sought the Lord in prayer.

For all of the bluster and pride of Sennacherib, the Lord is still the God of all of the earth. He is the one who created all. He is the one who is sovereign over all nations.

He has not been brought down from his throne. He is still enthroned above the cherubim. The empty words of Sennacherib are directed not just against the people of Judah but against the Lord.

Hezekiah calls the Lord to pay attention to them. The kings of Assyria have indeed laid waste all these other lands. But they served idols, false gods, gods that are no gods.

By contrast, the God of Judah is the true God and he can act against Assyria. He can deliver his people. The Lord responds to Hezekiah's prayer by the words of Isaiah, the son of Amoz.

In Isaiah's prophecy, the virgin daughter of Zion, Jerusalem, is described as wagging her head, scorning the reviling and the mocking of the king of Assyria, not taking them seriously. The king of Assyria boasts in his power and his might and the many great deeds that he has done. He has felled great nations like Cedars and Cypresses on the mountains.

He has caused his might to spread to all parts of the world, even up to Egypt. Yet the Lord is the one who determined all of this long ago. It is the Lord who oversees and directs the affairs of men according to his purposes.

The king of Assyria thinks that it is by his power that the fortified cities have been brought down. But that would never have taken place had it not been the Lord's will and determination that it should. The king of Assyria rages against the Lord, proud in his own power.

But the Lord can bring him down. The Lord can put his hook in his nose and his bit in his mouth. And against all of the odds, the Lord will turn him back the way that he came.

The Lord declares that he will give Hezekiah a sign to confirm all of this to him. Using agricultural imagery, the Lord describes a situation where after complete devastation of the land, within three years of such devastation, Judah will have placed roots down into the land again. The Lord is going to restore them.

This will be accomplished by the zeal of the Lord. He is zealous for his great name. He will not allow his people to be snatched from him.

He will not allow his name to be blasphemed. The king of Assyria will not be successful in his attempts to take the city of Jerusalem. There will not even be an arrow shot there.

Or he will not come up against it with the shield or a siege mount. He will be sent back, tail between his legs, the way that he came. God defended the city for the sake of his own great name and for the sake of his servant David, to whom he had made promises and given a covenant.

That night, the angel of the Lord went and struck down 185,000 of the Assyrians, much as the Lord had delivered his people from Egypt, and the destroying angel had struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians. So the angel of the Lord struck down the Assyrians. Zennecherib returned to Assyria, lived at Nineveh, and there was killed by two of his sons, ironically in the house of Nisrach, his god.

He mocked the Lord who was able to deliver his people in the most miraculous of ways, and yet his own god cannot defend him in his very own house. In Zennecherib, another enemy of the Lord is defeated and humiliated, and the faith of the people of the Lord is vindicated. A question to consider, how can the juxtaposition of Ahaz and Hezekiah within the book of Isaiah help us better to understand the theological import of their respective crises? Luke chapter 6 verses 20 to 38 And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said, So their fathers did to the prophets.

So their fathers did to the prophets. What benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount.

But love your enemies, and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. And your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

Be merciful, even as your father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure,

pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.

For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. In Luke chapter 6, in a passage described as the Sermon on the Plain, we find Luke's version of the material that we find in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. This, presumably, was a message given on several occasions.

A number of people have suggested that Matthew and Luke are in tension with each other at this point. But as Jesus is a teacher who's travelling from place to place within Israel, it should not surprise us in the least that he gives the same material in various sermons on various occasions. There are, however, a few differences.

Luke has four Beatitudes, corresponding with the first, the fourth, the second, and the eighth of Matthew chapter 5. He also parallels them with four woes. In the case of Matthew, there are woes that correspond with the Beatitudes in chapter 5, but those woes are found in chapter 23, the woes that are declared to the scribes and the Pharisees. Various biblical books are structured in a way that highlights the blessing-woe opposition.

We can think about it at the end of Deuteronomy. In the Book of Psalms, it begins with, Blessed is the man who does not walk, etc. The Book of Proverbs has this sort of juxtaposition in its first few chapters, particularly in chapter 9. Leviticus has blessings and woes in chapter 26.

Such oppositions are common throughout the material of the law, the material of the wisdom literature, and also in the material of the prophets, and they take on a different flavour in each. In the case of the law, there's an emphasis upon divine sanctions. In the case of wisdom, there's an emphasis more upon the different natural outcomes of wisdom and folly.

And in the case of prophecy, the emphasis is upon what God is going to bring about upon people who are rebellious as opposed to those who are faithful. Luke more strongly emphasizes the theme of reversal in the Beatitudes and woes, even than Matthew does. The blessings and the woes in Luke are symmetrical and paralleled.

The theme of the reversal of fortunes is also present here. We've seen this already in the Magnificat, and we see it later in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and it's found at various other occasions within the Gospel. The Beatitudes and the woes particularly do recall the Magnificat in chapter 1, verses 46 to 53.

We're seeing many of these themes returning at this point in the Beatitudes and the woes. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm.

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the

mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

We're seeing many of these themes returning at this point in the Beatitudes and the Woes. The point of the Blessings and the Woes is not to say what people should do so much as it is to declare the way that things are. And the message is very surprising.

It goes against what we might expect. It seems, as we read through much of scripture, that the blessed are those who are rich and prosperous and rejoicing. But here it's quite the opposite.

Those who are rich are not the ones who are blessed. Note that unlike Matthew's Beatitudes, these are also directly addressed to the disciples. Not blessed are those, but blessed are you.

The Beatitudes are paradoxical and there's a danger of de-eschatologising them, of forgetting that these statements only make sense if God is imminently going to act in history. That people are blessed because God is going to act in their favour. This is not just an implicit set of imperatives.

It's less about ethics than about what God is about to do. For instance, we should not pursue being persecuted. Persecution comes to the righteous, but they don't pursue it.

God is about to visit his people and those who have hungered for his advent will be given cause to rejoice. Their objective condition will change. And Luke has Paul rather than Paul in spirit and we might feel a bit uncomfortable about the fact that he doesn't invite spiritualising here.

We might want to be assured that he doesn't mean the poor literally, he means the poor in this spiritual sense. But we should be made to feel uncomfortable. The poor are the marginalised, the rejected, those who do not fit into the system of this world in some way or other.

And there's something fitting between the material conditions of the poor and the spiritual condition of being poor in spirit. Jesus elsewhere talks about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. The poor then cannot just be spiritualised.

On the other hand however, we should be aware of simply suggesting that the poor in spirit and the poor materially are one and the same group of people. There are rich people who are poor in spirit and there are materially poor people who are outside of the kingdom. The epistle of James highlights the way that poverty and riches in a very literal sense played into the early church's understanding of its relations.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like

a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

James 1 9-11. There James captures something of the paradoxical way in which Christians should relate to physical poverty and riches. James warns the Christians he is writing to against giving excessive regard to those who have riches.

Chapter 2 verses 2-6. And then in chapter 5 verses 1-5 this great statement of judgement against the rich. While we often want to soft pedal the teaching of the New Testament relating to riches and poverty, we should not do so.

Its teaching is all the more important because of how much it unsettles us. A further thing that comes out in Luke's Beatitudes and Woes is this emphasis upon division and judgement in society. There is going to be a reversal of fortunes in the future and there is also going to be a great division, a great divergence of these two groups.

Some are going to weep, some are going to laugh, some are going to have all their riches taken from them, others are going to inherit all. The disciples of Jesus are supposed to rejoice in the face of persecution. In persecution Jesus and his disciples are aligned with the prophets that went before them and of course after Christ the disciples are aligned with him in their persecution.

Jesus charges his disciples to love their enemies. This while a teaching that is often ascribed to Christ as a radical break with what went before is a teaching that we can find grounded in the Old Testament. Leviticus chapter 19 verses 17-18 presents the great golden rule in the context of loving your enemy.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

Where is love for neighbor most clearly tested? When your neighbor is your enemy. This is one area where the universalism of a liberal approach which sees the duty of love as this universal posture towards all mankind can often go awry. Because the greatest test is not in our relationship to the person who is in the far distance, it's the person who is nearest to us.

That is where we find the greatest challenge of love. The greatest challenge of love is not our posture towards people in far distant continents, it's how we relate to those people under our own roof, those people in our own neighborhood, the people in our own families, the people who are close to us in a way that irritates us. Those are the people we are most likely to hold a grudge against, to hold anger and harbor hate against in our

hearts.

And speaking with Leviticus, those are the people that Christ calls us to love. We must resist starting the cycle of vengeance. We turn the other cheek.

If someone takes our cloak, we do not withhold our tunic. We are not acting as people who are preoccupied with our own rights. Rather we look to the Lord as the one who defends us, who provides for us, the one who will avenge us if we are mistreated.

Generally, as human beings we have a desire for reciprocity. If we do things, we expect something back in return. But as Christians, we are supposed to do things expecting nothing in return.

And there is a paradox here again, because as we do that, our reward will be great. The principle in the Old Testament, he who gives to the poor lends to the Lord, applies here. As God guarantees our reward, we are free to act in an uncalculating way.

We can cast our bread on the waters, not knowing how they would ever return to us, but trusting that in God's providence they will. Not only will our reward be great though, we will also be sons of the Most High. We will have those characteristics that reflect God's own character.

Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Give, and it will be given to you. With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. There is a sort of reciprocity here, but the reciprocity is one secured by divine action, not our claim upon our neighbour.

The principle of not judging is one that we find in various occasions in Scripture. We see it in the hypocrite of Romans chapter 2 verse 1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

There's the principle in Deuteronomy chapter 19 verses 18 to 21 concerning hostile false witnesses. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.

Your eyes shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. The point of Jesus' statement about not judging is not a matter of not making moral judgments - there are many occasions in Scripture where we are called to do just that - rather it's not playing the judge.

Not putting ourselves in the position of God, exalting ourselves as the righteous arbiter over all others. And the emphasis here is upon condemnation in particular, again looking at the epistle of James chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. We are those who will face judgment ourselves, and the judgment in view is primarily eschatological judgment and there is a suspension of judgment on our part which occurs as we submit to the judgment of the Lord.

It's the same thing with vengeance. We do not seek to avenge ourselves, nor do we seek to realise the full reality of future judgment in the present because we recognise that vengeance is God's, and ultimately it will be secured by him. The principle of not judging also highlights hypocrisy.

We might think here of the parable of Nathan given to David, and David's judgment which is very fierce and then Nathan responds, you are the man. We can be caught in our own judgments. Rather than being people defined by judgment and condemnation of others however, we should be people who are primarily defined by forgiveness.

As we forgive others, so we will be forgiven. There is also the importance of sorting out our own lives first. This accusatory you is often a way in which we deflect attention from our own issues.

Condemnation of others can be a way in which we secure our self-righteousness. A question to consider, how does Jesus model his own teaching that he gives in this passage?