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September 23rd: Zechariah 3 & Matthew 17:1-23

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Cleansing and reinstalling the priesthood. The Transfiguration.

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Transcript

Zechariah chapter 3. Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a bran plucked from the fire? Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, Remove the filthy garments from him.

And to him he said, Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments. And I said, Let them put a clean turban on his head. So they put a clean turban on his head, and clothed him with garments.

And the angel of the Lord was standing by. And the angel of the Lord solemnly assured Joshua, Thus says the Lord of hosts, If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here. Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you.

For they are men who are a sign. Behold, I will bring my servant the branch. For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts.

And I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree. The book of Zechariah is a book written in the context of the rebuilding of the temple.

Zechariah's prophecies, along with those of Haggai, encourage the people in this project. And the night visions with which the book of Zechariah begins relate to the work that the people are undertaking. In particular, the night visions disclose what God is doing in order to re-establish the true worship of the temple.

The whole temple system had to be established by the Lord. And so it was not possible for the people merely to rebuild the temple and for it to operate as normal. Rather, the Lord had to take the initiative.

And in these chapters we see the way that the Lord is re-founding the system and through the message of his prophet Zechariah, giving his people assurance of this fact. The temple is being rebuilt. But to have a functioning temple, you need to have a functioning priesthood.

The problem is that the priesthood, to be properly operative, needs to continue. When there has been a break in the priesthood and in the worship of the temple, everything needs to be started off again. In Leviticus chapter 16 we have the law for the day of atonement, a day in which the high priest and the tabernacle were cleansed, blood being sprinkled over the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies.

This atoned for the sins of the past year and kept the system operating. However, with the temple destroyed, the system and the ritual has broken down. There's no way to cleanse the priest, there's no way to cleanse the people.

And because the ritual has been rendered inoperative as a result of the destruction of the temple, there's no clean priest to perform it now. The whole priesthood needs to be re-initiated and it's not entirely clear how that can happen. In this night vision, the Lord addresses this concern and this problem.

Joshua the high priest, elsewhere called Jeshua, is the son of Joseph, but he has a problem. His clothes of office are defiled. The garments of office of the high priest, garments of glory and beauty, are described in Exodus chapter 28.

They represent the people before the Lord. And the defilement of Joshua's clothes display the people's sin in the presence of God. Ideally, the high priest was supposed to come into the presence of God and be accepted on account of his garments, garments

that declared that he was holy to the Lord.

But Joshua's garments seem to be performing the opposite function. They declare the defilement of the people. In the vision, Zachariah sees the divine council.

We have visions of the divine council in places like 1 Kings chapter 22. The Lord enthroned in the heavens, surrounded by his servants. Here Joshua is in the presence of the council.

We might think of this in connection with the Day of Atonement, where the high priest would enter into the very throne room of the temple, the Holy of Holies, which represented God being enthroned above the cherubim. Ideally, the high priest would enter into the divine throne room and he would have the angel of the covenant at his right hand, pleading and interceding for him. The right hand is the place where the person would look to for support.

Psalm 109 verse 31, Or in Psalm 109 verse 6, Here in Zachariah chapter 3, it is an accuser that is at the right hand of the high priest, Satan himself. The power of Satan the accuser comes from the defilement and sin of the people. While Christ intercedes for his people on account of his atonement, Satan accuses people on the grounds of their guilt.

Overcoming the resistance of Satan requires atonement for the defilement of the people and the priesthood. He is opposing the work of re-establishing the temple. As long as he can point to the defiled garments of Joshua that represent the defilement of the people, the rebuilding of the temple can be frustrated.

Somehow the high priest needs to be set apart once more, set apart from the impurity of the people. As we have seen, the crucial ritual of the day of atonement could not be performed where there was neither an intact temple nor a pure and continuing priesthood. There was no assurance that the people would be accepted before God.

However, the accusations of Satan are not allowed to stand. The Lord is going to act on behalf of Jerusalem and on behalf of the priesthood. It is going to be re-established once more.

The original installation of the priest was performed by the prophet Moses and Zachariah the prophet is going to participate in something similar here. Joshua is described as like a brand plucked from the fire. He is one who has survived the judgement of exile that has fallen upon the people.

However, to be re-established the Lord has to deal with the problem of the clothing. The high priest, particularly when clothed with his garments of office, represented the people and their spiritual state before the Lord. We see this in Numbers chapter 18 verse 1. As James Jordan has pointed out, the ability of the high priest to enter into the presence of the Lord, particularly on the day of atonement, without being destroyed, was most

especially connected with the golden plate that he had upon his forehead.

Exodus chapter 28 verses 36 to 38. Jordan observes the significance of the absence of this in the story of Uzziah in 2nd Chronicles chapter 26 verses 19 and 20. In this vision then, the Lord is dealing with the problem of the garments of the high priest that represent the spiritual state of the people that the high priest brings before him.

While the day of atonement was the continuing celebration, this is a sort of foundational day of atonement. A day of atonement is a day of celebration. The Lord is not going to be at the very outset.

This is one of those passages in scripture where the angel of the Lord seems to be identified with the Lord himself. We see this particularly in verse 2. The angel of the Lord instructs the filthy garments to be removed from Joshua. These garments representing the sin of the people are taken away and in their place are given pure garments.

Perhaps surprisingly, Zechariah then speaks up, calling for a clean turban to be put upon the head of the high priest. As we have seen in Exodus chapter 28, this was an important aspect of the high priest's vestments. The angel of the Lord then delivers a word of encouragement and assurance to Joshua and to his companions, presumably the chief priests.

They are being installed in their office and there is an assurance here that their office will be effectual in bringing atonement for the people. As they are accepted, the people can be accepted. A priest is, as Peter Lighthouse has argued, a palace servant of the Lord, one who acts as a steward in the Lord's house where the Lord's throne is symbolically situated.

Joshua in particular as the high priest will be able to come into the very presence of the Lord in the Holy of Holies. This is followed by a surprising promise in verse 8. The chief priests are signs that the Lord will bring his servant the branch. We read of the figure of the branch elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 5. And then again in Jeremiah chapter 33 verse 15.

The restoration of the priesthood then and the temple service is a sign and a guarantee of the coming of the messianic branch and of the re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom. The cleansing and re-establishment of the priesthood is a sign that the Lord has not given up on his people, that there is still a future awaiting for them and in such a manner a promise that one day the Messiah would come. If we've been paying attention to the symbolism so far, the meaning of the stone in verse 9 should not be surprising to us.

The single stone with seven eyes that corresponds with the promise to remove the iniquity of the land relates to the golden plate that was upon the forehead of the high

priest which was also engraved with Holy to the Lord. That was seven Hebrew characters and here the stone has seven eyes. What more can we make of the symbolism here? Why not just describe it as a golden plate that was inscribed by the Lord? Why has the golden plate become a stone that is inscribed and that has seven eyes? When we think of the Lord inscribing a stone, we might think of the tablets of stone of the law.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 5 to 9. The engraved stone that's placed upon the forehead of the high priest here represents the law that's placed as the frontlets between his eyes, symbolically placing the commandments of the Lord upon his mind and also as a mark of divine ownership upon him. What about the seven eyes? In the next chapter of Zechariah, in chapter 4 verse 2 we read And he said to me, What do you see? I said, I see and behold a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And then again in verse 10 The lampstand in the temple is connected with the almond tree or the watcher tree.

In Exodus chapter 25 verse 37 we are given instructions for it. You shall make seven lamps for it and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. The high priest of course could be symbolically associated with the lampstand.

When Aaron's rod budded, in Numbers chapter 17, it produced almond blossoms. The high priest was also a watcher within the house of the Lord and also within the house of Israel more generally. In the stone with seven eyes that is placed upon the forehead of the high priest, perhaps we are seeing a deeper correspondence between the high priest and the temple in which he serves.

The engraved tablets of stone, though no longer in the Ark of the Covenant, are associated with the Holy of Holies, the golden lampstand with the holy place. In his garments the high priest is being represented as a sort of living temple. The Lord is going to cleanse the high priest and re-establish the worship of the temple.

But perhaps verse 9 is looking forward to something even greater. The removal of the iniquity of the land in a single day seems to have an eschatological referent. Elsewhere the imagery of people being under their own vine and fig tree is an image of true peace and prosperity in the land, where every single person enjoys productive property and every single person enters into some degree of enjoyment of the blessing of the land that the Lord had given to his people.

We see this language used in 1 Kings chapter 4 verse 25 of the reign of Solomon for instance. And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon. And then again in Micah chapter 4 verses 3 to 4. He shall judge between many peoples and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more, but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken. This promise then with which the chapter ends seems to have a messianic flavour to it. It has in view the full and true establishment of the kingdom of David in the true son of David who is expected to come.

A question to consider. In Jude verse 9 we read But when the archangel Michael contending with the devil was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, The Lord rebuke you. How does Zechariah chapter 3 help us to read Jude verse 9? And how does Jude verse 9 help us to understand Zechariah chapter 3 more fully? Matthew chapter 17 verses 1 to 23 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his eyes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good that we are here.

If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, Rise, and have no fear. And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. And the disciples asked him, Then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He answered, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come.

And they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him, and kneeling before him said, Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures, and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.

And Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, How long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me. And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. Then the disciples came to

Jesus privately and said, Why could we not cast it out? He said to them, Because of your little faith.

For truly I say to you, If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day. And they were greatly distressed.

In Matthew 16 and 17 we've moved to a turning point in the narrative of the Gospel. If baptism initiated the first phase of Jesus' ministry, the transfiguration initiates in part the second. Jesus announced the kingdom at the beginning of his ministry, and now he announces his forthcoming death.

A great shadow has come over the scene, and we are being prepared in these ominous statements for this great movement towards Jerusalem at which Jesus will die. In the final verse of chapter 16, Jesus declared that some of those standing there would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man coming in glory. The presence of this statement before the transfiguration is common to all of the synoptic Gospels that record this event.

But yet it does not seem to be a fulfillment of the statement in total. It would be strange to speak about some not tasting death before they saw this thing, when no one actually tasted death before some people saw that thing. Rather I think this is an anticipation of something that would be revealed more generally later on.

What Peter, James and John are seeing here is a sneak preview, as some sort of trailer of what's going to happen in the future. In the book of 2 Peter 1, verse 16, Peter writes many years later, Now the problem that faced Peter when he was writing this book and writing this letter, was that many of the other apostles had died. Many of those who were standing there here in Christ at the end of chapter 16 of Matthew had already passed on.

And Jesus had said that he would do these things, that they would see the kingdom before some of them had tasted death. And it seems as if the clock is ticking. Peter is still alive but he seems to be hastening towards death.

And so somehow this promise has to be fulfilled. Now what Peter does at this point I think helps us to understand the connection between the transfiguration and Jesus' earlier statement. He points to the events of the transfiguration as it were a full dress rehearsal of this later revelation of Christ's glory.

That they have seen Christ's glory on that mountain. And they know that it's there. It's just a question of when it's going to be revealed to the world more generally.

To understand the event that's being referred to here we should go back to Daniel

chapter 7. I believe that the event that Jesus refers to in saying that some will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom, I believe that's referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But this event of the transfiguration anticipates that later event. It's the revelation of the glory of the last Adam and the second man placed on the mountain.

There are a number of details here that should make us think back to the story of the Exodus. The appearance of God in that glorious theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai. Where Moses' face shone in that transfigured glory.

But there's a difference between Moses and Jesus here. Moses went up on the mountain and his face shone. But his face shone with a reflecting glory.

In the story of Christ going up on the mountain, the glory comes from Christ himself. The glory is not a reflected glory so much as Christ's own proper glory. On the Mount of Sinai there is this glorious appearance of God in a theophany.

There is the plan given for the tabernacle. There is the gift of the law. And here Peter wants to build tabernacles for Elijah, for Jesus and for Moses.

There is also the establishment of the high priest and the glorious garments of the high priest. Christ's garments shine with him. It's not just Christ but it's his glorious garments.

Christ is being revealed as the glorious high priest on this mountain. And he's also being revealed as God's glorious revelation. As we look through the Old Testament there are many stories where God appears in glory to his people, to his prophets and to others.

We see it in the beginning of the book of Ezekiel. We saw the heavens opened and saw visions of God. And Ezekiel's description of the throne chariot vision of God is one in which we see this human-like figure but the language is elusive and it can't quite capture or describe what he is in fact seeing.

We have descriptions of some features of this figure but we never see the face. We never have a direct description. Same thing with the vision of Isaiah in the temple in chapter 6 of his prophecy.

In that chapter the Lord is seen high and lifted up, the train of his robe filling the temple. Moses sees the back of God on the Mount of Sinai. In all these cases God is revealing his glory in the glorious angel of the covenant perhaps.

But no one sees the face completely. I believe what we see in part here on the Mount of Transfiguration is the face of God's glorious theophanic presence being revealed. And as we read back through the Old Testament we know who this person is.

When Moses sees the glory of God on the top of Mount Sinai, when Isaiah sees the glory

of God filling the temple, when Ezekiel sees the throne chariot of the Lord, they're seeing Jesus. They're seeing the Son in his glory. And in the book of John this is particularly emphasised as he can speak about Isaiah's vision and say that Isaiah said this when he saw his glory, his referring to Christ.

And so this theophany, this event of the Mount of Transfiguration helps us to read Old Testament narrative, to understand that all these events in the Old Testament are events of the revelation of the glory of Christ. But we only see that retrospectively. Once the face has been revealed everything else is known.

God gave the law to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai. And on the Mount of Transfiguration God declares the gift of his law, the gift of his word in Christ. This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.

Listen to him. As Hebrews chapter 1 declares, And the Mount of Transfiguration is precisely a revelation of this truth. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that Christ is the great word of the Father.

It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the radiance of the glory of God. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he's so much more superior to the angels. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the one who fulfills all these revelations of God in the Old Testament.

He is the high priest. He is the one with the glorious garments. He is the one who will sit down on high once he has made atonement for sins.

And as Christ reveals himself in these glorious high priestly garments on the Mount of Transfiguration, we begin to understand as he moves towards Jerusalem that he is not going to Jerusalem under compulsion. He's not going to Jerusalem as one who is weak and forced by circumstance. But he is going to Jerusalem as the great high priest committed to completing his mission.

Committed to doing his great work and then sitting down at God's right hand, having completed it. Having wrought atonement and deliverance for his people. Moses and Elijah stand alongside him.

Moses, the one who gave the law. Elijah, the one who is seen as this great prophet. The paradigmatic prophet.

They're the great witnesses. They're the wilderness forerunners. Moses went before Joshua as Joshua entered into the land.

Elijah went before Elisha as Elisha led this conquest in miracles and signs of the nation of Israel. And Jesus is the one who goes and completes this great Exodus work. He is the greater Joshua.

He is the greater Elisha. He is the one who will lead his people into the truest and most complete rest. And these forerunners in the wilderness prepare the way for him just as John the Baptist did.

Jesus tells his disciples to keep the vision under wraps until after the resurrection. There are things that can only be known properly in their proper time. The significance of the transfiguration only becomes apparent from the vantage point of the cross and resurrection.

Until those times it might seem this vision of glory detached from suffering. A vision of glory that would nullify the importance of suffering at this point in Jesus' story. But the transfiguration and its association with Jesus' teaching concerning his future suffering, they cannot be separated.

They belong together. To understand the transfiguration we need to see the suffering. To understand the suffering we need to see the transfiguration.

The disciples ask about their understanding of the future. They believe that Elijah was to come first. And Jesus has been speaking about the resurrection and that seems to come at the end of all things.

So what about Elijah that was to come? Jesus says that Elijah has come and they understand that it is John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the one who came in the spirit and the power of Elijah as we see in the declaration of Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple. He's the one who dresses like Elijah.

He's the one who has the conflicts that remind us of Elijah with Herod and Herodias like Ahab and Jezebel. When Jesus reaches the bottom of the mountain he finds that his disciples have failed to cast out a demon. Their failure in this regard maybe could recall the story of Moses descending down Mount Sinai and finding that in his absence Aaron had failed dismally.

He had given in to the people and they had built a golden calf. And that fashioning of the golden calf leads to great judgement upon the people. Now the failure of Jesus' disciples at this point is nowhere near the same magnitude.

But they are judged in a way that recalls the judgements of Moses upon the unfaithfulness of the people. O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? This is the language of Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 5 and 20. Jesus declares to them that if you have faith like a mustard seed it would be sufficient to tell a mountain to move from here to there.

And that mustard seed maybe draws our mind back to chapter 13. The mustard seed is that smallest of all the seeds but it will grow into something great. The point here is not just the faith being small in and of itself.

It's the fact that that faith can grow. What does it mean that faith can move mountains? In the context of the eschatological visions of the Old Testament there are often mountains being moved. Mountains and hills being brought low and valleys being raised up.

In Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 23 to 25. I looked and behold the fruitful land was a desert and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before His fierce anger. In Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4 to 8. And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Ezzel.

And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah the king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with Him. On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost.

And there shall be a unique day which is known to the Lord neither day nor night. But at evening time there shall be light. On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea.

It shall continue in summer as in winter. And then finally in Revelation chapter 6 verse 12 to 14. Maybe what Jesus is referring to is this great event in which things will be moved and the whole order will be transformed at this culminating eschatological event in history.

And their faith will be part of that. Even if it may be like a small mustard seed now, it can grow to a great tree and participate in that event in the future. A question to consider.

Looking from the vantage point of the Mount of Transfiguration it could be argued that the glory of Christ is the very centre of the story of Scripture both Old and New Testament. How would you make this case?