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October 1st: Zechariah 11 & Matthew 22:1-33

September 30, 2021



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The rejection of the shepherd. The Parable of the Wedding Feast.

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Transcript

Zechariah chapter 11. I will slaughter them and go unpunished, and those who sell them say, Blessed be the Lord, I have become rich, and their own shepherds have no pity on them. For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of this land, declares the Lord.

Behold, I will cause each of them to fall into the hand of his neighbor, and each into the hand of his king, and they shall crush the land, and I will deliver none from their hand. So I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders, and I took two staves, one I named Favor, the other I named Union, and I tended the sheep. In one month I destroyed the three shepherds, but I became impatient with them, and they also detested me.

So I said, I will not be your shepherd. What is to die, let it die. What is to be destroyed, let it be destroyed.

And let those who are left devour the flesh of one another. And I took my staff Favor, and I broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. So it was annulled on that day, and the sheep traders who were watching me knew that it was the word of

the Lord.

Then I said to them, If it seems good to you, give me my wages, but if not, keep them. And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, Throw it to the potter, the lordly price at which I was priced by them.

So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter. Then I broke my second staff Union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel. Then the Lord said to me, Take once more the equipment of a foolish shepherd.

For behold, I am raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for those being destroyed, or seek the young, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs. Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded! Zechariah chapter 11 seems to continue the oracle that began in chapter 9. The preceding two chapters, I argued, dealt primarily with the context of the Greek period. It spoke of the Jews under the Seleucids, and then of the Maccabean Revolt and the conflict with the Hellenized Jews.

These concluding chapters of Zechariah are some of the hardest to understand in the entire Bible, and in the minds of many commentators this is the hardest of all. Within the chapter Zechariah seems to perform some sort of prophetic drama, representing the Lord being rejected as the shepherd of his people. The question of when to relate this to is a difficult one, in light of the ways that this chapter is used within the Gospel of Matthew particularly.

Many have seen this as looking forward to the story of Christ. Peter Lighthouse, considering the context of the preceding chapters, argues that this should be seen to relate to the Maccabean period, and perhaps leading up to the time of the Herods. That period is also dealt with within Daniel chapters 11 and 12.

Thinking about it in terms of a theological pattern, he compares this to the wilderness period under Moses, and the rejection of Moses, the shepherd of his people, by the people. This also continues the themes of Passover and Exodus that have been at play in the preceding chapters. Anthony Pettison, using people like Michael Stead, argues that this chapter should be read as retrospective, casting a theological judgement upon Israel's history that had led up to the removal of Israel and Judah from the land, and their current position under foreign rule.

Of the positions on offer, I find this perhaps the most compelling. Within his Gospel, Matthew uses Zechariah, but his use of Zechariah, as in his use of other Old Testament prophecy, is subtle, and his approach to fulfilment is not as straightforward as many readers would presume. This is particularly important in his use of Zechariah chapter 11,

which he seems to attribute to the prophet Jeremiah.

This has caused commentators all sorts of headaches. Did the evangelist make some mistake? Was some error made in copying the Gospel? Far more likely, and more interesting, is the possibility, and indeed likelihood I would argue, that Matthew was engaged in a very elaborate intertextual play, bringing the prophecy of Zechariah into correspondence with a number of prophecies within the book of Jeremiah. As we begin looking at this chapter, we immediately face the question of where verses 1-3 fit into the larger context.

Do they relate primarily to the preceding chapter, or do they relate primarily to what follows? The verses seem to be a lament concerning a disaster that has, or will befall Israel. This would seem to be out of keeping with the themes of victory with which chapter 10 ended. Consequently, it seemed more likely to me that this should be read in association with the material of chapter 11.

The imagery of these verses is an imagery of a great forest fire, and of trees being felled. Such imagery is familiar from other prophets, perhaps especially the prophet Isaiah. Trees symbolise rulers and prominent people.

We see this in places like Isaiah chapter 2 verses 12-13. Again in Isaiah chapter 10 verses 17-19. Imagery of cedars can also be connected with great buildings, such as the temple, and also with the buildings of the rulers of the people.

Within the temple complex in Jerusalem prior to the exile, for instance, the temple building was built with cedars, but also some of the king's buildings. There was the house of the forest of Lebanon, for instance. The dynastic house of the king could also be referred to in such a manner, in Jeremiah chapter 22 verses 6-9.

For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah, You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon, yet surely I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city. I will prepare destroyers against you, each with his weapons, and they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire. And many nations will pass by this city, and every man will say to his neighbor, Why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city? And they will answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other gods and served them.

This, it seems to me, is the best way to understand what this lament is referring to. It's referring to the house of the rulers of Judah and Israel. The cedar is the greatest of the trees, and perhaps it's being spoken of in the singular here because it represents the king.

But the cedar is not alone. There are also the glorious trees that are ruined. The frame of the prophecy may be expanding at this point to include the whole ruling class.

The Oaks of Bashan and the Thick Forest, these are other great ruling trees that have been removed. The imagery of a felling of a great tree in scripture is of course used in the second dream of Nebuchadnezzar, where he sees himself as a great tree that has cut down. The destruction of the thicket of the Jordan might refer to the removal of some of the defense of the nation.

Its removal has led to the emergence of predatory lions who used to dwell there, and they will prey upon the flock. These lions seem to be another way of speaking about the false shepherds that will be discussed later on in the passage. This lament, I believe, describes the situation to which the nation had been brought as a result of its sins.

Even after the return from exile, they still languished in this position. In the more difficult part of the passage that follows, Zechariah is commissioned to perform a number of symbolic actions. It is possible that these were enacted as a sort of prophetic drama, but others wonder whether they were primarily delivered in an oral or written form, as some of them will be difficult to play out.

The meaning of the initial charge given to Zechariah is debated. What does it mean to become shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter? Is the shepherd here being presented as an evil figure who is going to kill the sheep? Alternatively, should we see the picture as one of the shepherd coming in to protect the flock from being slaughtered? Verses 5 and 7 might give support to this. Another possibility, and one that I lean towards, is that the slaughter refers to the destiny of the people on account of their unfaithfulness and the unfaithfulness of their rulers.

The lord becomes shepherd of the flock, but the behaviour of the under-shepherds dooms the flock to destruction. Their actions described in verse 5 involve the selling of the sheep to those who would slaughter them. This most likely refers to the actions of the kings of Judah and Israel, who entered into imprudent and idolatrous alliances with other kings, selling the flock of the lord to those who would destroy them.

As a result of the behaviour of the people and their rulers, the lord determined to deliver them into the hands of their neighbours, other nations and their kings. He wouldn't deliver his people from their hands. In the symbolic sign act of becoming the shepherd of this flock, Zechariah had taken two staves, one that was called favour and the other called union.

The reference to destroying three shepherds in one month in verse 8 has puzzled commentators. Lighthouse, for instance, argues that this might refer to the fall of the Hasmoneans and the rise of Herod. Perhaps the three shepherds are three high priests, or Gentile rulers such as the Seleucids, or perhaps three kings of Israel or Judah.

Advocates of that last position, for instance, can argue that it refers to Jehoiakim, Jehoiakin and Zedekiah being removed from the throne in short succession. The one

month symbolically refers to that brief span of time. Stead observes the way that this passage draws upon imagery and language from the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah chapter 12 verse 3 Stead remarks upon the connection between verse 9 and Jeremiah chapter 19 verse 9 He also references Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 2, connecting it with the final verses of the chapter concerning the foolish shepherd. Pettison summarises Stead's argument. In the account of the fall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah chapter 52, on the ninth day of the fourth month, in verse 6, the city wall is breached and the army scattered.

Significantly, King Zedekiah is captured and his sons perish. Jeremiah chapter 52 notes that one month later, on the tenth day of the fifth month, verse 12, Nebuchadnezzar's commander Nebuchadnezzar arrived and burned the temple, palace and houses of the city, broke down the city wall and carried many into exile. In this month in which Jerusalem fell, its leadership is exiled or killed.

Against this background, Stead proposes that the three shepherds are the three types of leadership that perish when Jerusalem fell, the king, the prophets and the priests. Even if we differ with certain aspects of this reading, it has a long pedigree. In some form it goes all of the way back to the Jewish Targum of the book of Zechariah.

This occurred as the people rebelled against the Lord and detested him, and the Lord would no longer bear with them in their rejection of him. He ceased to act as their shepherd, surrendering the flock to its fate. The reference to those who are left devouring the flesh of one another might refer to predatory leadership.

It might also refer to the great curse of the covenant, where those who are left in the siege would end up eating the flesh of their children. The breaking of the staff favour is an annulling of the covenant. Zechariah seems to perform this action in some context in public.

He is witnessed by sheep traders, which within the drama represent either the foreign kings or the kings of Israel and Judah that sold the people to them. Alternatively, we might translate the expression not as sheep traders but as the afflicted of the flock. Verses 12-14 seem to describe a symbolic action by which the good shepherd was more firmly rejected.

Peterson suggests that we should see this as an ultimatum. The prophet is suggesting that either they pay up and relieve him of his duties or cease to detest him as they are described as doing in verse 8. They decide merely to give him his wages, letting him go from his position. Thirty pieces of silver are weighed out for him.

In verse 13 the Lord instructs him to throw this money to the potter as it is rendered in most translations or perhaps the moulder as Peterson suggests. Charles Torrey argues

that what is in view here is the foundry within the temple that melted down gold and silver gifts that were given to the temple to be stored in the treasury. Peterson observes the development of this theory with the recognition that much of this melted down silver would have been sent to the Persians in the form of taxes.

This of course is significant because the money with which the shepherding of the Lord was rejected is now being given to pagan nations. Perhaps there is another dimension to this. In Exodus chapter 21 verse 32 we read of the restitution that has to be paid if an ox gores a slave.

If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned. Judah and Israel had become like goring oxen, goring the servants of the Lord, the prophets. The Lord argues that in the rejection of Zechariah's symbolic shepherding he was being rejected.

They were putting a measly price upon the Lord as their shepherd. The money being thrown into the house of the Lord is money being paid to the Lord to pay him off for the fact that they had been goring his servants the prophets. We might here think back to 1 Samuel chapter 8 verse 7 as the Lord said to Samuel, Zechariah then breaks the second staff called union, annulling the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

This might look back to the breaking of the bond between the northern and the southern kingdoms during the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam. It might also have in view the removal of the northern kingdom from the land. Ezekiel chapter 37 speaks of the joining of two sticks together, the stick of Joseph and the stick of Judah.

This refers to the period after the restoration. This is one of the reasons why for me it seems most likely that this prophecy refers back to the period prior to the exile. It is explaining how the flock of Israel ended up in the position that it is currently in.

As he has twice been rejected as the good shepherd, the Lord gives Zechariah one further instruction. He must now take up the equipment of the foolish shepherd. The Lord will no longer deliver, as he had formerly done, the people from their wicked shepherds.

He would hand them over into the hand of foolish shepherds, foreign nations who would not care for the flock. As they had tolerated such behaviour from their own shepherds, now they would suffer such treatment from foreign shepherds. The condemnation of the final verses might remind us of Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 1 to 6. The word of the Lord came to me.

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds. Thus says the Lord God, Our shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe

yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep.

The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered.

They wandered over all the mountains, and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. A question to consider.

Can you think of the key moments within the history of Israel and Judah in which they most definitively rejected the shepherding of the Lord over them? Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 to 33. And again Jesus spoke to them in parables saying, The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants saying, Tell those who are invited, see I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready, come to the wedding feast.

But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully and killed them. The king was angry and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment, and he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for many are called, but few are chosen.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.

And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, Whose likeness and inscription

is this? They said, Caesar's. Then he said to them, Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

When they heard it, they marvelled, and they left him and went away. The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses said, If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up offspring for his brother.

Now there were seven brothers among us, the first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all the woman died.

In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her. But Jesus answered them, You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given a marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God? I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living. And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

In Matthew 22, Jesus continues his confrontations with the Jewish religious and political leaders, and a number of different sects and parties challenge Jesus at this point. We start to get more of a sense of the politically, religiously, and socially fraught situation into which Jesus was speaking here. The parable of the wedding feast follows on from the parable of the wicked tenants.

It's still concerned with questions of authority that have been raised in the preceding chapter. The son is the royal bridegroom, and the invitation being sent out is an invitation to a wedding feast, presumably to various officials and rulers. And the way that the servants are mistreated by those that are being invited is quite extreme.

They are even killed in some cases. They're being invited to a wedding feast, and they're killing the people bringing the invitation. This seems fairly extreme.

But it's important to remember that this is a political event. It's the wedding feast of the son of the king, the heir of the kingdom. And as such, it's a rejection of the son, and an act of treason and insurrection.

Many see the destruction of the city that's referenced as AD 70. But given the second half of the parable, with the further set of invitations, Peter Lighthouse has suggested that it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It's different from the parable as we find it in Luke chapter 14, which comes in a very different context, and does not have a number of the details that we have here.

For instance, it's not a king in Luke's account. And there's not the second half with the part concerning the wedding garment. It suggests to me that these are two independent parables, and should not be seen to be referring to the same thing.

Luke's account is given in a different context, and we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus, as a teacher that's going around from place to place, would repurpose illustrations and parables, and change them in different ways for different purposes. I think that's probably what we're seeing here. We should observe how many details the parable of the wedding feast shares in common with the parable of the wicked tenants, which precedes it.

There's a son, there are servants being sent out, the servants are being mistreated, etc. All of this serves to indicate that the two parables should probably be read alongside each other, as belonging together and helping to illuminate each other in different ways. They're not twins, as we've seen elsewhere, but they certainly do illuminate each other and serve a common theme.

For many readers who see the destruction of the city as being the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the second set of invitations are the ones sent out to the Gentiles, and to others perhaps like the tax collectors and the prostitutes. That's not necessarily the case. We can maybe see it as one that's given to Israel as it's brought back to the land, and certain people, including the tax collectors and the prostitutes, are invited in, and there's a rejection of the old Israel that was sent away into exile.

There's a second inspection that occurs at the end of the story, the inspection of the clothing of the guest at the wedding feast. In Revelation chapter 19, we have a reference to wedding garments, and it talks about the bride making herself ready. It was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And here there's an inspection of wedding clothing. The man without clean garments is dishonouring the king, and presumably willfully so. There's a sorting process here as the king inspects the guests, and there's a warning about presuming upon election.

Many were invited. Israel's story is a story of many being invited, but only a few proving worthy. People were destroyed as a result of their rejection of the prophets, the servants that were sent, and even those that seem to come at this point prove themselves to be hypocrites, to not have the deeds that conform to the wedding feast that they've been invited to.

So there's a warning about presuming upon election, and there's a reframing then of the concept of election. We see this reframing of election, for instance, in chapter 24, verses 22, 24 and 31. For instance, in verse 22, And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved, but for the sake of the elect, those days will be cut short.

In verse 24, For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. And then finally, And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet, call, and they will gather his elect from four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. This develops the previous parables challenge to the security of the status of Israel and its leaders.

Israel may have presumed upon its covenant election that God had chosen Abraham, and them in Abraham, but this notion of election, many being called, but few being chosen, is an unsettling of that concept. Jesus is redrawing the concept of election within this and the previous parable. After Jesus gives this parable, the Pharisees join with the Herodians to trap Jesus.

The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem and Judea, but supporters of the Herodian dynasty presumably still operated there. And we also know from the narrative of the Passion that Herod was in the city over that period. In this and the following two challenges, what we see is a challenge to Jesus' authority and the jockeying for power that exists in Jerusalem at that time, with different parties vying for dominance.

Tax for Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy and the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land. And the Denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Tiberius Caesar being the son of God.

One way or another, it seems, Jesus is caught. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and revolutionaries against Rome, or he will seem like a compromiser with Rome. And his answer to the question, however, is a profoundly shrewd one.

First of all, he asks them to produce a coin, and this isn't just a visual aid, it's something more than that. They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession. The Jews have their own coinage, but they clearly have one of these coins, these coins with a blasphemous statement and image on it, they have one in their possession.

And Jesus' answer is an incredibly wise one. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Perhaps one thing we should observe is that it is an ambiguous statement.

To some it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him, to others, pay your taxes. But there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There's a willingness in Jesus' teaching to be dispossessed of such items.

The opposition between God and mammon may be playing out here. In Jesus' teaching concerning the temple tax as well, Jesus just does not get into fights about paying money. The concern for money that the Pharisees and others display is a result in part of

the fact that they serve money, that they are in bondage to the love of money.

But there's probably more going on. First of all, there are Jews to be paid, both to Caesar and to God. And Jesus' statement suggests that we need to recognise both and distinguish between them.

The coin is Caesar's. And so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition. It's something that is for services given.

What did the Romans ever do for us? Well, the aqueduct, the sanitation, the roads, the irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, safety and public order, all these sorts of things. And the expectation that you render back to Caesar something in exchange for that is perfectly reasonable. That doesn't mean a legitimization of everything that Caesar is doing.

Rather, the sense of giving back can indicate a sort of non-investment in that whole economy. That you're giving back, you're not actually participating in the same way, you're not investing yourself in this. You're invested in the Kingdom of God, so you're prepared to give money back to Caesar.

Jesus escapes a trap, but he also makes some important theological points. He treads a line between compliance and resistance. Rendering to God what is God's places clear limits upon what you give to Caesar.

Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Other people have seen some sort of opposition between the image of Caesar on the coin and the image of God on human persons. You don't render persons and ourselves to Caesar.

Now, I think that's a bit of a strange reading, but it's possible and it certainly is something that's true in principle. Our section ends with a challenge from the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. They present this strange case based upon the practice of the Levirate Commandment.

The commandment that when a man died, his brother would marry his widow in order to raise up seed for him. And so this is a convoluted story of some really strange, bizarre situation that arose when a woman ended up marrying seven brothers after each other, after each one died. Now, there's a much less extreme version of this scenario in Genesis chapter 38 with Tamar, Onan and Shelah and also Judah in that situation.

Each one of them are involved with her in some way. And we might well ask in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges the idea that resurrection is just a sort of revivification, a return to an extension of our existing forms of life. We will be like the angels.

The angels don't marry. They're a non-procreating living host and they endure, they

don't die. However, marriage is given to fulfill the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and also to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death.

There is a presumption here that marriage is ordered in its very institution towards procreation and when procreation is no longer an end, marriage ceases to exist. The Levitical Law is dealing with the problems where marriage fails to raise up seed. It's dealing with the problems of marriage in the face of death.

And marriage more generally is dealing with a pre-eschatological situation where there is still a need to fill the earth, where there is still the reality of death to deal with. Whereas in the resurrection, there's a new principle of life. There's a new principle of generation or rather regeneration, no longer marriage.

We are not born to a husband and a wife in the regeneration, in the event of the resurrection. Rather, we are reborn from the grave. And as a result, this new principle of regeneration leads to a completely different form of society.

We can maybe see the Law of the Leviticus against this backdrop. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, the law is about raising up seed for the dead brother. There's a sense in which the dead brother is being raised up through offspring, being born to his wife through his brother.

And that principle of resurrection is part of the Levitical commandment. Although it's resurrection in the context of a society that's shaped by the reality of death. Jesus then appeals to God's statement to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And it seems to be a strange argument for the resurrection. But it seems to me that the point is he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not he was.

God is defined in some way as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As the covenant God. The God who is not just the God who was the God of those people, but the God who is.

And as a result, there is the assumption that they have some continued existence to him. Indeed, the action of the Exodus is being done in part on their account, for their sake. And so there's the presumption that they live to God, with the implication that they will one day be raised bodily.

A question to consider. What does Jesus' teaching in response to the Sadducees have to teach us about the purpose of marriage and also how the reality of marriages here and now in this age might be transposed into the reality of the new creation and the resurrection?