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September 28th: Zechariah 8 & Matthew 20:17-34

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The coming peace of Jerusalem. Jesus foretells his death a third time.

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Transcript

Zechariah chapter 8. Now I will not deal with the remnant of this people as in the former days, declares the Lord of hosts. For there shall be a sowing of peace. The vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew.

And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. And as you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing. Fear not, but let your hands be strong.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the Lord of hosts, so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Fear not. These are the things that you shall do.

Speak the truth to one another. Render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

And love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord. And the word of the

Lord of hosts came to me, saying, Thus says the Lord of hosts, The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts. Therefore love truth and peace.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, People shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord and to seek the Lord of hosts. I myself am going.

Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you. Zechariah chapters 7 and 8 are a bridge from the visions of the opening six chapters to the oracles of chapters 9 to 14.

Chapter 7 began with a delegation sent by the people of Bethel inquiring about the continued practice of the fast of the fifth month. That fast commemorated the destruction of the temple, but now that the temple is being rebuilt, it is natural to wonder whether it should be continued. The message of Zechariah in response to that question continues in this chapter.

In these two chapters there is also a gathering of themes that run throughout the book. Chapter 7 presented the cautionary example of past generations while chapter 8 articulates a vision of hope from which people can draw confidence for the future. The material of these chapters can be divided by prophetic formulae, of the kind that we see in chapter 7 verse 1, verse 4, verse 8, chapter 8 verse 1 and chapter 8 verse 18.

Chapter 8 verse 1 stands apart from the other formulae in speaking of the word of the Lord of hosts coming, without specifying to whom it came, although we should presume that it was Zechariah. Along with these prophetic formulae dividing larger sections of material, we have the formulae, thus says the Lord of hosts, by which the material of chapter 8 can be divided into ten short thematically clustered oracles. Reading the oracles of this chapter we should often recognize echoes of language of earlier parts of the book.

For instance, the declaration of the Lord's jealousy for Jerusalem recalls places like chapter 1 verses 13 to 16, and the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, Cry out! Thus says the Lord of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion, and I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease. For while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster.

Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy. My house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out

over Jerusalem. The declaration that the Lord has returned to Zion in verse 3 recalls chapter 2 verse 10, Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I come, and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord.

Similar resonances can be found throughout this section, serving to underline previous messages delivered both by Zechariah and by Haggai. It is quite likely that this material from Zechariah was compiled at a later point by the editor or editors of the book of Zechariah, or perhaps by Zechariah himself, and arranged in order to accent such themes. The jealousy of the Lord is a prominent dimension of the Old Testament's witness to his character, most notably within the Ten Commandments.

As a jealous God, the Lord will not tolerate any who would take his glory from him, or who would seek to attack, destroy, or estrange his people from him, nor will he passively tolerate his people's own betrayal. The jealousy of the Lord is a consistent reason for his salvation of his people. He will not allow other powers to take his people from him.

He will also act for the sake of his great name. The jealousy of the Lord can, among other things, be understood as an expression of his love, a love that will not let his people go. As in the third vision of the man with the measuring line, verse 3 speaks of the Lord's return to dwell in Zion, in the midst of his people.

Through his presence within her, Jerusalem will become the faithful city, starting to reflect the Lord's character. Alternatively, we could interpret this statement as a reference to the Lord's own faithfulness, by which the city will be named. The Lord's holy presence will set her apart as holy to himself.

The former prophets had warned of the desolation of the streets of the wicked city, the silencing of its songs, the stilling of its squares, and the cessation of its commerce. As Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 21 expressed this, for death has come up into our windows, it has entered our palaces, cutting off the children from the streets, and the young men from the squares. The prophetic vision of a good city is a place where the elderly can pass their final years enjoying rest from their labors, and where carefree children can play in safety.

It's a place of joy, play, and song, where the gentle passage of life through its seasons, and from older generations to their successors, is visible and peaceful. The restoration of the joy of the city is also declared in places like Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 10 to 11. Thus says the Lord, in this place of which you say, it is a waste without man or beast, in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord.

Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures

forever, for I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord. This promised future is remarkable, and may seem incredible, perhaps meeting with incredulity from some who struggle to see beyond the current situation of the city. However, the Lord, who has the power to achieve this, does not suffer from the same constraints of vision.

The account of the restoration of Jerusalem and its future peace continues in verses 7 and 8. The Lord's people, who had been scattered, will be regathered, a promise familiar from places like Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 7 to 8. For thus says the Lord, sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations. Proclaim, give praise, and say, O Lord, save your people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together a great company.

They shall return here. A surprising detail in Zechariah's prophecy is the reference to the east and the west countries. It is far more typical for the scriptures to speak of the north and the south, even though Egypt was in the southwest, and Mesopotamia in the northeast.

However, the actual reference is from the land of the rising and the land of the going in of the sun, which suggests that the Lord is going to gather his exiles from the whole circuit of the sun's daytime passage, from one end of the heavens to another, a far more comprehensive gathering than from the east country and from the west country might imply. He will manifest his character as the faithful and righteous God, as he saves and restores his people. Verse 8 includes the familiar covenant formula of I shall be their God, and they shall be my people.

The longest of the ten oracles of the chapter is the sixth, running from verse 9 to verse 13, bookended by the charge, let your hands be strong, encouraging the people in the task of rebuilding the temple. This prophecy most likely refers not to the initial founding of the temple under the governorship of Shesh-Baza, but to the restarting of the work on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of the second year of Darius. Zechariah's prophecy here recalls that of Haggai chapter 2 verse 15 to 19.

Now then, consider from this day onward, before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord, how did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty. I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail, yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord.

Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider, is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on, I will bless you. As in that prophecy, there is a contrast

between the former days of lack and danger and the days of prosperity, plenty, blessing and security that will follow.

Judah and his land will be fruitful, experiencing the blessings of the covenant rather than its curses, and in fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, Judah would become a byword for blessing among the nations. The Lord's judgment upon his people had been driven by a set purpose. His purpose to bless Jerusalem and Judah is no less determined.

At the end of the preceding chapter in verses nine and ten, the Lord had reminded the people through Zechariah of the message that he had given their forebears by the prophets prior to the exile. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another. Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.

The father's refusal to pay attention had led to their destruction. However, as the generation of the remnant of the returnees heed the warning of the Lord delivered in their own generation, they will experience the Lord's determined purpose to do them good. Chapter seven had begun with the inquiry of the men of Bethel concerning the practice of the fast of the fifth month, commemorating the destruction of the temple, now that the temple was being rebuilt in Jerusalem, should the situation change.

Along with the fast of the fifth month, there was also the fast of the seventh, to commemorate the assassination of Gedaliah, the governor and the end of Judah's autonomy. Here toward the end of the section, the Lord addresses the question of the men of Bethel again. The Lord speaks not only of the fast of the fifth and the seventh months, but also of fasts of the fourth and tenth months, likely two other fasts related to the downfall of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's walls had been breached in the fourth month and the siege of the city had begun in the tenth. It is possible that various fasts were practiced at different places in the land and that not every city observed the same days. Addressing a wider audience, Zechariah might be mentioning fast days beyond those in view when his word was more focused upon Bethel.

Mourning and the sorrowful memory of the past would be eclipsed by the celebration of new blessings. Fasts would be transformed into feasts. This transformation is one that would be received and enjoyed by the people as they lived in terms of the Lord's blessing and liberation.

The gift of the law at Sinai, for instance, was the means by which Israel could live out the reality of their freedom that had been wrought by the Exodus. The more that they rejected the way of justice and faithfulness, the more that they would find themselves being bound once more, subdued by oppressors and suffering the consequences of their sins. For this reason, the promise of coming blessing here is attended by a charge to love

truth and peace.

Faithfulness, justice and peace would be the manner in which their liberty would be enjoyed and they must desire and pursue such things. Several of the prophets speak of pilgrimages to Jerusalem from the nations in the days to come. As Zion is raised up, people will flock to her from the peoples, bringing gifts and tribute to the Lord and seeking his face in his favor.

Indeed, the book of Zechariah itself will end with another development of this theme. Jerusalem's blessing will have a magnetic effect for others, drawing them to its light. This theme continues in the tenth and final oracle of the chapter.

Gentiles will be so eager to join themselves to the Lord's people that ten of them will grasp a single Jew in order to accompany him to Jerusalem and to identify with the Jews, as the Lord is manifestly with that people. This might, among other things, be seen as both a reversal of Babel, the mention of the men from different tongues, and a fulfillment of the blessing of Abraham. A question to consider, can you think of any further ways in which this chapter alludes back to earlier parts of Zechariah and Haggai? Matthew chapter 20 verses 17 to 34.

And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and on the way he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day. Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, What do you want? She said to him, Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom.

Jesus answered, You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink? They said to him, We are able. He said to them, You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my father.

And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him. And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, Lord have mercy on us, Son of David. The crowd rebuked them, telling them to

be silent, but they cried out all the more, Lord have mercy on us, Son of David.

And stopping, Jesus called them and said, What do you want me to do for you? They said to him, Lord, let our eyes be opened. And Jesus in pity touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him. In Matthew chapter 20, Jesus gives the third prediction of his death.

And it's important that Jesus declares his death beforehand. It is not an accident or fate overtaking him unawares. Jesus predicts in very clear detail what will happen, who will be the participants, and what exactly they will do.

Jesus is going up to Jerusalem, he's ascending to the place where he will be condemned and crucified. He will be condemned by the chief priests and the rulers of the people. He'll be given to the Romans, to the Gentiles, and they will crucify him.

They will mock him and they will scourge him beforehand. All of these things are predicted in very great detail. When the disciples look back on this, they will see that these events happened according to God's determined plan, and according to Christ's foreknowledge.

Christ knew what he was doing. He did it purposefully. At this point, however, there's a jarring note as the mother of James and John comes with a request to Christ.

The wife of Zebedee, in stark contrast with everything that Jesus has just taught, asks for a place of honour for her two sons. James and John are present, but their mother makes their case for them. It might be worth bearing in mind at this point that their mother is almost certainly Jesus' aunt, and they are his cousins, his first cousins.

So this is in part a family privilege that's being requested. They are, of course, two of the three closest disciples, part of that inner group that follow Christ to places where the other disciples do not go. With Peter, they were on the Mount of Transfiguration.

They have had privileged access in certain respects, and they now want this privileged status. They want these two thrones on either side of Christ, or these honoured places in the banquet, feast of the kingdom. But they do not know what they're asking.

If they want these places, they will need to drink the cup that is placed before them. They will indeed one day do this, but the very way that their request is being made makes clear that they do not understand what it is that they are requesting. They do not know the path that it requires.

Later on, we do see two people, one on the right hand of Christ and the other on the left, but it's found in verse 38 of chapter 27. Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. What it means to be on the right and the left of Christ is to suffer with him.

That is the path that must be taken by those who want the honour of the best seats in the kingdom. Now, the disciples will be called to follow that route after their Lord, but at the moment they're still not clearly understanding this. They've heard Jesus declaring his death once more and they've still not got it.

They're still thinking in terms of the fervour of messianic expectation that this Davidic king is going to come, he's going to set up his kingdom, and there's going to be a situation in which they're sitting on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Now, while this is clearly part of the picture, there is much more going on that they do not truly appreciate. When the other disciples hear this they're indignant, but more as those who wanted such honours for themselves than as people who truly opposed the principles that impelled James and John to make the request.

Jesus teaches here about the contrast between the characteristic of Gentiles in authority and the form of authority that should be characteristic of his kingdom. The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over others, they seek to get dominance over others, they seek superiority and status and influence and all these sorts of things. It's a self-serving attempt.

And it isn't as if there's no honour in the kingdom of Christ. There is honour, but it is not obtained through jockeying for power. Rather it's found in the way of humility and of service.

Jesus previously taught his disciples by placing a child in their midst and saying that the kingdom of heaven belonged to such persons, that that was the example to imitate. And here he does the same thing, he has to repeat the lesson because they've clearly not gotten it. Here he teaches that it should not be that way among them, not be the way that it is among the Gentiles.

Rather whoever wants to be first must be the slave, whoever wants to be great must be the servant. The way that honour is achieved within the kingdom of God is through service, is through humility, is through not vaunting oneself over others and seeking status over them, not jockeying for power as James and John were trying to do, but in serving others. Jesus then gives himself as an example.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Now the meaning of this particular expression has been debated. Many have seen this as Jesus expressing his humble service, his menial service of his people.

But I don't think that's quite what's going on here. What is the service in question? Are we thinking about Christ assuming a position of a servant relative to a master in a sort of lowly manward service? Or are we thinking about Christ as one who's carrying out a charge, as one who is commissioned as an agent with a ministry, not as one to be surrounded by a retinue of attendants and other people that are serving him as a typical

Gentile lord. Rather Christ came to perform the task of the Isaianic commissioned servant, the servant of Isaiah, not to get a status for himself.

The focus here then is not straightforwardly upon Christ as a humble servant of man but upon Christ as one on a mission from his father. Now he's not gaining status for himself, he's not pursuing honour in the way that the Gentiles do, he's not pursuing honour through domination. However nor is the accent upon menial service.

Christ is on a commissioned mission from his father. He is one who's been sent, he's been commissioned, he's been given a task, he's a go-between, he represents the father as he acts. And so when we read that expression, the son of man came not to be served, the point is not to say the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life of ransom for many, but the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

The point being that Christ did not come to gain dominance as a king, to have people that he could lord it over. No, he came on a mission from his father and that mission was to give his life as a ransom for many. Recognising this matters because often we use the concept of servanthood to undermine or to empty out the concept of lordship.

Christ is the lord but he is also the servant. Now what does it mean that Christ is the servant but also the lord? He's not a lord like the Gentiles, lording it over others, trying to dominate over others and get a retinue of attendants and people doing his bidding. That's not the sort of lord that Christ is.

But Christ is a servant in the sense of one commissioned from his father, as one sent by his father, as one representing the authority and the rule of his father, as one who is faithful to his father. And he's also one who acts towards mankind in a way of care and concern. He gives his life as a ransom for many.

It's an act of love, it's an act of humility and in that way he's not lording it over people. But in that act of loving concern he does not become the servant of the people that he is ministering to. Rather he is acting in his father's authority as he shows a humble concern for humanity in need.

His humble work towards humankind does not make him the servant of humankind in the way that he is the servant of his father. Rather he is commissioned and sent by the father and he blesses and he humbly ministers to. In the same way Christian ministers are not called to just be servants of all in the sense that they exercise no real authority within the life of the church. Rather the point is that as ministers of Christ they should exercise their authority in a way that's characterized by humility.

Not vaunting it over others but using that authority to build others up, to take menial positions relative to others. Not because they have no authority, not because they have

no honor, but because honor in the kingdom is found in faithfully ministering Christ in humility and in self-denial. As we better understand this it will protect us from the trap that many people have fallen into in using concepts like servant leadership, in using one aspect of that to negate the other.

Rather if we understand servanthood in the way that scripture presents it where the servant is not merely someone who's performing a menial role but the servant is someone who's commissioned and sent, who's a representative, who's a go-between, who acts with the authority of someone else. Now that is not something that is just menial service. Just because someone can perform menial service doesn't mean that they're apt for this sort of servanthood.

What Jesus teaches in such places is not a denial of genuine authority, rather it's the way that true authority should be exercised in the kingdom. Not as vaunting over others, not as lording over others, but as exercising a true authority in a way that is humble and meek, that seeks to build up others and not take advantage over them. Leaving Jericho Jesus is followed by a multitude of people excited by this bold new prophet and teacher and potential messiah.

The blind men call out to him as he's going by as the son of David, son of David have mercy on us. That request is one that Jesus finally answers. The crowd is trying to shut them up, to ignore them and to pass them by, but they insist and Jesus opens their eyes.

Perhaps we are to see these two characters playing off against James and John. James and John, this pair that do not truly see, the disciples who do not truly understand what it means for Jesus to be the messiah, what that calling actually entails, and these two blind men who have their eyes opened, their physical sight drawing attention perhaps by contrast with the disciples continuing blindness regarding the true nature of Jesus' mission. A question to consider.

One of the consistent features of the New Testament is what has been called the transvaluation of values or code switching. The way that terms that have a particular resonance and significance for us are shifted in their meaning. So the poor become rich in the kingdom of God or we can think about the ways in which those who are going to be masters or great among people need to become the servants of all.

There is a reversal of the typical order that we associate with things. Strength can be made perfect in weakness. There is freedom to be found in being slaves of Christ.

If we want to save our lives we must be prepared to lose them. If we want to be exalted we must humble ourselves. There is always a danger however in using this language of emptying out one term or other of their proper meaning and not exploring the true tension and the true paradox of what is being taught.

What are some concrete ways in the practice of leadership and authority within our communities that we can understand the relationship between leadership and authority and service without emptying one or the other of those terms of their force?