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October 17th: Psalm 119:25-48 & Mark 2:1-22

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Psalm 119:25-48. Eating with tax collectors and sinners.

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Transcript

Psalm 119 verses 25 to 48. My soul clings to the dust. Give me life according to your word.

When I told of my ways, you answered me. Teach me your statutes. Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

My soul melts away for sorrow. Strengthen me according to your word. Put false ways far from me, and graciously teach me your law.

I have chosen the way of faithfulness. I set your rules before me. I cling to your testimonies, O Lord.

Let me not be put to shame. I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart. Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will keep it to the end.

Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your

testimonies and not to selfish gain.

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things and give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise that you may be feared. Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good.

Behold, I long for your precepts. In your righteousness, give me life. Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise.

Then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word. And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for my hope is in your rules. I will keep your law continually forever and ever, and I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts.

I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame, for I find my delight in your commandments which I love. I will lift up my hands toward your commandments which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes. Mark chapter two, verses one to 22.

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home, and many were gathered together so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them, and they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him.

And when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, son, your sins are forgiven. Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming.

Who can forgive sins but God alone? And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, your sins are forgiven, or to say, rise, take up your bed and walk. But that you may know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins, he said to the paralytic, I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home. And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God saying, we never saw anything like this.

He went out again beside the sea and all the crowd was coming to him and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi, the son of Alpheus, sitting at the tax booth and said to him, follow me. And he rose and followed him.

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of

the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting and people came to him and said, why did John's disciples and the disciples of Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? And Jesus said to them, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast in that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wine skins.

If he does, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is destroyed and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wine skins. In Mark chapter two, Jesus performs a healing followed by a series of confrontations with and questions from the religious authorities.

The same sequence of events is also found in Matthew chapter nine and Luke five. While the previous chapter was mostly about Jesus' rising fame and the messianic secret, here we start to see conflict with the religious authorities coming into the foreground. Jesus is challenged with a series of why questions.

In verse seven, why does this man speak like that? In verse 16, why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? In verse 18, why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast but your disciples do not fast? And then in verse 24, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And then Jesus responds to each of these challenges in turn in a way that drives forward his teaching. In verse 10, but that you may know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins. In verse 17, and when Jesus heard it, he said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick, I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

In verse 19 and 20, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. And then in verses 27 to 28, and he said to them, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

So the son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath. The section that we are looking at is part of a sequence beginning in verse one of this chapter and then ending in chapter three, verse six. Jesus returns to his own city of Capernaum.

The last time he was there, he had to leave secretly because of the size and the demands of the crowds. And as soon as people discover that Jesus is there again, once

again, the place is crowded. Presumably Jesus is in the house of Simon.

This is the place where he seems to have his base. And as noted in the previous chapter, the mother-in-law of Simon is probably acting as his hostess there. While Jesus is teaching, four men bring a paralytic to him on a bed.

However, since the crowd is so great and they cannot approach him, they remove the roof above him and lower the man down to him. They overcome both the obstacles of the crowd and the roof to reach Jesus. And their faith is expressed in their persistence born of confidence in Christ's power and willingness to save and to heal.

Jesus responds to their faith by declaring the sins of the paralytic forgiven. Now we should note the interesting detail that it is in seeing the faith of the men who are bringing the paralytic to Jesus that Jesus is led to declare the sins of the paralytic forgiven. This isn't just a physical deliverance or even an exorcism.

As we've already seen, this is a far more powerful act of salvation. It's also seemingly exercised in response to the faith of people other than the man who's being brought to him. It's in these verses that we can get confidence, I believe, to continually pray for Christ to save people.

Perhaps our persistent faith will be blessed with the fruit of another person's salvation. The scribes think he's blaspheming, claiming a prerogative that is God's alone. Only God can forgive sins.

Who can forgive sins but one, that is God. And that seems to be a reference to the Shema. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one.

Jesus recognizes what is in their hearts and he challenges them. He heals the man as a demonstration of his authority to forgive sins. Very easy to say you have the authority to forgive sins, but in actual healing of the man, he's giving a proof of the fact that he has that authority.

So there's a two-stage healing here. There's an inward healing, as he's forgiven his sins, and an outward healing, as his body is restored to him. Once again, Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man.

He's acting in a particular office. The Son of Man is a figure of eschatological significance, a sort of great prophet, perhaps. The Son of Man isn't just a judge, though, but one who brings forgiveness.

In Daniel chapter seven, the figure of the Son of Man is a judge and one having great authority over the nations. But Jesus presents the establishment of the kingdom and the authority of the Son of Man as being exercised through forgiveness on Earth, which is a surprising note for this eschatological figure. The response of the crowd is amazement

and to glorify God.

When going out beside the sea and teaching the crowd after this, Jesus saw Levi, the son of Alpheus, standing at the tax booth as a tax collector. Now, in Matthew's gospel, we're told that the tax collector was Matthew. Presumably, Levi was another name by which he went.

There's another son, however, of Alpheus among the disciples called James, which raises the possibility, which a number of people have held, that Levi, or Matthew, was his brother. Now, among the disciples, there are a number of brothers, James and John, Simon and Andrew, and in this is the case, James and Matthew, too. Half of the disciples, at least, would be brothers of each other.

As some early Christian writers claim that Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, was the same as Mary, the wife of Clopas, and that the James in question was James, the son of Alpheus, which is the Latin that corresponds to Clopas for the Greek, and that Clopas was the brother of Joseph, Jesus' father, this would make Levi Jesus' cousin. Now, at this point, we're venturing far beyond the realm of certainty, but it's an interesting possibility, one that is based upon claims made very early on in the church's history. If it is indeed the case, then Jesus probably had four of his first cousins among his disciples, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and James, the son of Alpheus, and Levi or Matthew, the son of Alpheus.

This should perhaps unsettle some of the preconceptions people have about Jesus' opposition to the family structure. Jesus is teaching about leaving father and mother and the importance of his disciples being his true family, but not in a way that simply abandons the natural family structure, rather it tries to take that structure into the life and the reality of the kingdom, and for that reason, we see many of Jesus' brothers involved later on in the history of the church. The tax collectors were despised for collaborating with the Romans, and also for their injustice.

They dealt with Gentiles, and the Gentiles were an imperial oppressive power of the Romans, but what Jesus does in eating with the tax collectors is he's redefining the nation. The nation is redefined around the meal table. It's a place where people are fellowshiping together, something that foreshadows the meal of the kingdom as people are brought in and eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

There are a client at table in his house, and from Luke, the house in question seems to be Levi's. Jesus comes as a guest, just as he goes to the house of Peter after his call, and is a guest within the house of Peter while he's in Capernaum. The story begins with one tax collector sitting down and being called to rise up, and it ends with a larger number of tax collectors sitting and eating with Christ, and the Pharisees come into the picture here.

They challenge Jesus for his fraternizing with tax collectors and sinners, but Jesus highlights the fact that his concern is for those who are sick, those who need forgiveness, those who are sinners. His concern is for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, those who need to be restored. Of course, as we go through the gospel, we'll see that the Pharisees are sick, but they do not realize it.

They're in need of forgiveness, and they don't recognize it. They're sinners, and yet they see themselves to be the righteous, and so Jesus' statement here should not be taken to suggest that the Pharisees are okay. No, it's to express his concern for the tax collectors and the sinners, and as we see as we go through the book, to be a challenge to the Pharisees who fail to recognize their status.

The disciples of John question him after this, and this connects to the preceding story with the shared theme of eating. So the story that begins the chapter is concerned with the theme, among other things, of sin and forgiveness, and then the eating with the tax collectors and sinners is connected with sin and forgiveness too, and then that's connected with eating, which is connected with this next story, and so there's a daisy-chain pattern through the chapter where each story connects with the one after it with some particular key theme. When Jesus is questioned concerning the fact that his disciples do not fast, unlike the Pharisees and the disciples of John, he answers with an illustration about the bridegroom.

Christ is the bridegroom. This is an anticipation also of the future departure of Christ, one of the earliest that we have in the Gospels. Jesus is going to depart from them, and when he departs, they will fast, but until then, he will be with them, and they will celebrate as they have the bridegroom with them.

This is a window into Christ's self-understanding. Christ is the bridegroom, come for the bride. It also helps us to understand the previous story with the tax collectors and sinners.

Jesus is the one who's come feasting for the bride. As the bridegroom, he's celebrating the marriage, the wedding, and the people that are coming in and eating with him are having some experience of that eschatological wedding feast, the wedding feast that's awaited at the very end of history. New wine has to go in new wineskins, and if it's put into old wineskins, it will destroy them, and both will be lost.

This is an illustration to help to explain Jesus' teaching about fasting. There are the old practices of the law and the pharisaical traditions, but there's the way that the fulfillment of the law that Christ brings in goes beyond the containing and constraining structures that they are working within in their tradition and in their legal structure. John and his disciples and Jesus and his disciples are operating in some ways in different ages.

Jesus and his disciples are anticipating what's to come. They're experiencing it. They're

having a foretaste of that wedding feast here and now.

John and his disciples were awaiting the action that Christ would bring. The language of the wineskins, tearing, is very strong language. It suggests something about the way that Christ relates to the old order, the tearing of the temple curtain, for instance, or the tearing open of heaven at his baptism.

Christ is bringing about a tearing apart of the old order and an eruptive new order arriving within the midst of that. Central to this chapter is the theme that Jesus is bringing something new then, something that cannot be bound by the existing categories and structures. As he answers controversy after controversy, we see that Christ does not fit expectations.

He does not fit the limits and the categories that people are working within. He's presenting something new, something that's radical, that gets back down to the root. To be a follower of Jesus then is to be a participant in this new age that is dawning in history.

A question to consider, we should not miss that at the heart of these controversies with the religious leaders is the question of who Jesus is. What are some of the ways in which light is shed upon the answer to this question within this passage?