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March 17th: Exodus 24 & Matthew 22:34—23:12

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The covenant ceremony. Challenging the Pharisees.

Genesis 15 (the covenant ceremony with Abraham); Hebrews 9:15-22 (Christ and the blood of the covenant).

Psalms 2 ('gathered together' against the Lord and his anointed); Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (the first great commandment); Leviticus 19:9-18 (the second great commandment); Psalm 110 ('the Lord said to my Lord'); Matthew 5:1 (the crowds and the disciples gathering around for the Sermon on the Mount).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglican church.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus 24 Then he said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him. Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules.

And all the people answered with one voice and said, All the words that the Lord has

spoken we will do. And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people.

And they said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient. And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel.

There was under his feet, as it were, a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the cheap men of the people of Israel. They beheld God, and ate and drank.

The Lord said to Moses, Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction. So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. And he said to the elders, Wait here for us until we return to you.

And behold, Aaron and her are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them. Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.

Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. Exodus chapter 24 concludes a period of law with a section of narrative.

It's the ratification of the book of the covenant. The leaders of Israel are summoned to worship in verses one and two. The point of the law is worship and relationship with the Lord, which this chapter really underlines.

The bond between the Lord and the children of Israel is more personal than contractual. Many have seen this in terms of a suzerain vassal treaty, the sort of treaties that exist between kings and tributaries within the ancient Near East, but what we see here is something that goes beyond that. The bond between the Lord and the children of Israel is more personal and more like a sort of marriage covenant.

The three priests, the seventy elders and Moses are summoned up the mountain. You should note that they stand at different points. Once again we can relate this to the order of the tabernacle.

Moses is the prophetic uber-priest, the Levite prophet by whom God establishes the entire system, while Aaron functions within the system. Moses writes down all of the words as a written testament and then later on he reads the book of the covenant, the contents of chapters 21 to 23, to the people and then they are sent to it. Moses builds an altar at the base of the mountain with twelve pillars representing the tribes of Israel and there's a repetition of the people's ascent to the words of the book of the covenant.

There may be two distinct stages here, Moses explaining the words of the book of the covenant first, relaying them in his own words and then reading the book out to the people. There are two stages of the covenant ratification as well. There are the burnt offerings and the peace offerings that Israel practices with the associated blood right and then there is the meal of the elders, Aaron and his sons and Moses before the throne of the Lord.

Through these rituals a formal covenant bond is established between God and his people. This is a marriage. There's already a bond between the Lord and the Israelites through Abraham but this is a further development and an intensification of that relationship.

This covenant is not an arrangement between two equal parties. There are mutual commitments but God is the one who establishes the covenant and the people are the ones who are called to submit to it. The covenant is not just the rules but it's also the promises.

God has declared his commitment to the people and the conditions that come with it are always shaped by that fundamental commitment of God to his people, his deliverance of them and these conditions are not something that undermines the Abrahamic covenant as Paul makes very clear in the book of Galatians. The Abrahamic covenant is not conditional in the same way. There are conditions here that will shape Israel's relationship with the Lord but the Abrahamic covenant that underlies it and that provides the basis for God's relationship with Israel in the first place is not conditional.

The burnt offerings and the peace offerings atone for and consecrate the people to the Lord and express their communion with him. Half the blood is thrown against the altar and half is thrown against the people and it's a formalizing ritual. You can maybe remember the ritual of Genesis chapter 15 where the animals are divided in two and the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch goes through the midst.

As in the case of Genesis 15 this rite provides part of the foundation for the enduring practice of sacrifice which repeats and recapitulates this rite and event. It points back to

the fundamental relationship between God and his people and every time they sacrificed it was referring back to this reality. You can think also of the way that this is related to Christ in Hebrews chapter 9 verses 15 to 22.

For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people he took the blood of calves and goats with water and scarlet wool and hyssop and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people saying this is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you and in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed under the law almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. The elders, the priests and Moses have an audience with the Lord himself, an intimate audience.

They see a manifestation of the Lord upon his throne and they see his feet on this sapphire pavement. God invites them into his royal presence in safety and there's a communication here of fellowship and closeness. Moses is then summoned further up the mountain where he goes with his assistant Joshua.

God will there give him the tablets of stone and behind he leaves her who represents the elders and Aaron who represents the priesthood. They will be the leaders of the people in his absence. God's authority in the law is underlined here.

We're also seeing more of the principle of the relationship between Sinai and the tabernacle, the altar at the base, the way that the elders can go into the middle realm, the people have to go in the surrounding area, the courtyard and then Moses can go into the very presence of God himself and we'll see more about these connections as we go further. And at this point I think we should also notice some allusions back to the story of Noah and the covenant with Noah, not least in the order of the days. There are two sets of seven days and then there's a 40-day period in which there's an ascension up.

You can think about in Genesis chapter 7. First of all in seven days I will send rain on the earth and then later on and after seven days the waters of the flood came upon the earth and then further the rain fell upon the earth 40 days and 40 nights and the waters increased and bore up the ark and it rose high above the earth. So we're seeing two sets of seven, we're having a period of 40 days and during that 40 days raising up the ark to God's presence. Moses ascends to God's presence during the 40 days and 40 nights and so I think there's some sort of correspondence here that we're supposed to notice and as we get into the next chapter we'll see that it continues and there's obviously something deeper going on here.

The Sabbath principle should also be noticed that Moses is admitted to God's presence on the seventh day. There has been a decreation in the events of the Exodus and the plagues and now there is a new covenant and a new humanity being established on this mountain just as there was a new covenant and a new humanity formed through Noah. A

question to consider, how did the events of this chapter help us to understand Jesus's statement about the blood of the covenant at the Last Supper? Matthew chapter 22 verse 34 to chapter 23 verse 12.

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment and a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question saying, What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him, The son of David.

He said to them, How is it then that David in the spirit calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet. If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son? And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses's seat.

So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called Rabbi by others. But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven.

Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

At the end of Matthew chapter 22, the challenging of Jesus by the religious and the political leaders continues and then is concluded. The Pharisees present the third question to test Jesus here, and perhaps we should recognize some similarities with Satan's testing of Christ early in the gospel. These questions are malicious tests, not honest and innocent questions.

They gather together against the Lord, and that language should remind us of the second psalm. Bear in mind the conversation that follows where it is the anointing of the Davidic king that is at issue, the Davidic Messiah, and the Pharisees gathering together

against Christ is similar to the nations gathering together against the Lord and his anointed in that psalm. They are hoping that Jesus is going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching.

Perhaps the greatest commandment is you shall not commit adultery, or maybe remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Whatever Jesus answers, he will seem to tread on some toes and open himself up to some criticism that he has unbalanced teaching. But Jesus' answer once more is incredibly shrewd.

The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And that statement is the greatest commandment. In this commandment the entire law is encapsulated, and the second great commandment arises from it. These two commandments sum up the entire ten commandments and all the other attendant commandments.

The law is not just a collection of 600 plus miscellaneous laws, it's a system of truth and justice summed up in the call to love God and neighbour. These positive commandments that lie at the heart of all these negative restrictions. You can think about the two statements that Jesus references in their original contexts.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 to 5, the statement about loving the Lord your God, that comes immediately after the gift of the ten commandments or the repetition of the ten commandments in chapter 5, and it's the beginning of all that summary material, all the material that follows from it and helps to flesh out what that commandment means. Leviticus chapter 19 is where the law concerning loving your neighbour comes from, and there that commandment comes at the end of a list of other commandments. Now reading that list you probably noticed that it sums up most of the second table of the ten commandments.

We have the first table summed up in loving the Lord your God and the second table summed up in loving your neighbour as yourself, and all of the law and the prophets flow from these two great principles, these positive principles at the heart of everything. And now we should see that this is antithetical to the way the Pharisees approached the law. The Pharisees seemed to approach the law just as a miscellaneous series of commandments.

They do not have a sense of its inner motion and its inner purpose and dynamic. Rather it's just a set of legalistic binding commands and nothing more. There's no sense of the love that lies at the heart of it.

And what Jesus teaches here is that there is a logic to the law, and that logic is love for

God and neighbour. And we will not truly understand why Jesus dumbfounds the Pharisees until we realise just how powerfully his teaching here undermines their entire approach to the law. These commandments express the positive truth at the heart of all that thou shalt nots.

And those positive truths are the whole subject matter of the law and the prophets throughout the entire scriptures. It's these principles that stand in the dead centre of everything. Everything arises out of these.

Jesus poses a challenge in response to the Pharisees' challenge to him, and his challenge is about the Christ, referencing Psalm 110. It is a Davidic Psalm in which David refers to the Christ as his Lord, which makes no sense at all if the Christ is merely his son. And the Pharisees clearly don't have a way of thinking about this.

They don't have a category within which this would make sense. The Christ seems to be more than merely the son of David according to the flesh. There's obviously some theological problem here.

How do we deal with this? And at this point the Pharisees are completely unable to answer him. They're stuck. They're dumbfounded.

They're stumped. In chapter 23 we see Jesus moving on to speak to the crowds and to his disciples. Jesus began in chapter 5 by gathering his disciples around him and then the crowd around them, and now he's speaking to the same sort of group.

This reminds us then of the Sermon on the Mount is the first great message. And as we look at this message more closely we'll begin to observe ways in which there is a symmetry between it and the opening sermon. What we have here is something binding the book together, that there's a unity to Jesus' message and the teaching that he goes through has a logic and an order to it, and Jesus' entire teaching has been leading to the point that he reaches in this chapter.

This chapter will sum up the entire message of his teaching and Matthew really does focus upon Jesus' teaching to a greater degree than most of the other Gospels. In this message, having overcome the challenges of the religious and political leaders, Jesus speaks to the crowds and the disciples concerning them. He has also just spoken of the fact that the Christ, who he is, will sit at God's right hand with all of his enemies being placed under his feet, being made his footstool.

Christ is the true king and now he speaks concerning the false shepherds of Israel. Jesus' challenge throughout this chapter is focused upon the false shepherds of Israel, not upon the flock of Israel. The false shepherds are the wicked vine-dressers, they're the people who dishonoured the king who invited them to the wedding.

The flock of Israel are like the sheep without the shepherd, they are like the hands of

those who will produce its fruit. The Pharisees currently sit in Moses' seat and much of their teaching is correct and legitimate and should be followed but their lives are full of hypocrisy and their vision of the law is burdensome and oppressive. They're ignorant of the true liberating intent at the heart of the law, they have all these commandments that they speak in terms of but they're ignorant of justice, mercy and faith, those principles at the heart.

They do not recognise the way that love is the binding truth behind all of the law, the glue that holds everything together and so they just have these burdensome commands. They lay heavy burdens upon the people, not like Moses in whose seat they sit but like Pharaoh, the one who Moses stood against. They're concerned with the praise of men and with social status, they love the markers and the honorific titles of the religious authority, the special seats that they're given, the special titles and names that they enjoy.

And there's some exaggeration and satire here no doubt, much as in the earlier descriptions that Christ gives of people sounding a trumpet before them when doing their charitable works, but the new shepherds that will take their place must not follow such an example. The ministry of Christ's body must be characterised by humility. The point isn't to dismiss all titles, we see the apostles using titles on occasions.

No, the point is not so much a strict denial of the legitimacy of all titles or respect of ministers of Christ, no, it's about the nature of that ministry. It's a ministry that is honoured but it's honoured precisely in the practice of self-effacing ministry in Christ's name to others. It isn't exalted over others, it's a ministry performed by brothers, not by those who are over us.

Personality cults and cults of church office have no place in the kingdom. Honour comes in a completely different form from that which the Pharisees seek. Those who seek to exalt themselves will be humbled.

But the flip side of this reveals the true character of ministry in the kingdom of God. The one who humbles himself will be exalted. This is what Christ himself does and this whole passage emphasises the uniqueness of Christ.

Christ is the one who sits at God's right hand. All of us are under the Christ, all of us are ministers of Christ. We're sent by him and we are responsible to him and all true ministry flows from and points to Christ, not to itself.

If our ministry is pointing to ourselves then it is a false ministry, it's not a true ministry of Christ. A question to consider, how do we see Paul applying some of Jesus' teaching here in places like 1 Corinthians chapter 1?