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October 27th: Isaiah 9 & Mark 8:11-38

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Unto us a child is born. Peter's confession and Jesus foretells his death.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 9. But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty Guard, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it, and to uphold it with justice, and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel, and all the people will know, Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, who say in pride and in arrogance of heart, The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones.

The sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place. But the Lord raises the adversaries of reason against him, and stirs up his enemies. The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west devour Israel with open mouth.

For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. The people did not turn to him who struck them, nor inquire of the Lord of hosts. So the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day.

The elder and honoured man is the head, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail. For those who guide this people have been leading them astray, and those who are guided by them are swallowed up. Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men, and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows.

For everyone is godless and an evildoer, and every mouth speaks folly. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. For wickedness burns like a fire, it consumes briars and thorns, it kindles the thickets of the forest, and they roll upward in a column of smoke.

Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire, no one spares another. They slice meat on the right, but are still hungry, and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied. Each devours the flesh of his own arm.

Manasseh devours Ephraim, and Ephraim devours Manasseh. Together they are against Judah. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

The end of Isaiah chapter 8 spoke of the gloom of the people without the light of the word of the Lord, who had turned the occult for revelation. Chapter 9 begins by speaking about a reversal. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali had been taken by Tiglath-Pileser III, as described in 2 Kings chapter 15 verse 29.

In the days of Pekah king of Israel, Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-Bethmeyekah, Jenoa, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria. The Transjordan was the land that used to be owned by the two and a half tribes, Reuben Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. The northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had struggled to gain full possession of their land, and at many points in the nation's history, parts of this land or even the whole of the land had been lost.

Galilee of the Gentiles, not usually referred to in such a manner, was a more melting pot region to the north of the Jezreel valley, around the lake that we would call the Sea of Galilee. There are a number of questions about this opening verse. Many commentators separate it from the material that immediately follows it in verses 2 to 7, connecting it instead with the material of the preceding chapter.

Others wonder whether the second half of it should be understood as, but in the latter time, he has treated harshly the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. In Matthew chapter 4 verses 13 to 16, verses 1 and 2 of this chapter are connected together. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned. Unlike those in the nation who pursued false gods and mediums and soothed saying, a glorious new dawn would come for those who waited for the Lord. These are verses familiar from many nativity plays and from lessons and carols, most memorably presented in Handel's Messiah.

The promised new dawn seems to be arising in the very regions of northern Israel, first annexed by Tigilath-Pileser III, Naphtali and Zebulun. Expressed in a form akin to that of thanksgiving hymn, the prophet's announcement of the reversal of Judas' circumstances is compared not only to a great dawn, but also to the joy of harvest and the celebrations that follow a decisive victory over an oppressor, the bringing in of a new era of peace. Deliverance from oppression is described using language recalling the exodus, and also there is a reference made back to the victory over the Midianites through the work of Gideon.

In the story of Gideon, the Lord had used a very small force to defeat a much larger one. All of these things are spoken of as if they had already happened, although they are still awaited in the future. The event that has led to this celebration is the birth of a child, a crown prince and an heir to the throne of David.

A few significant children were mentioned in the preceding chapters, Shiar Jashub, the son of Isaiah in chapter 7, Emmanuel in chapter 7 and then in chapter 8, Meher Shal al-Hashbaz. Some commentators have seen the description of verse 6 as relating to, anticipating or taking on the form of a coronation ceremony. To support this position, they have pointed to some supposed parallels within the Psalms.

Psalms 2 verse 7, I will tell of the decree, the Lord said to me, You are my son, today I have begotten you. In that verse, a coronation seems to be described as if it were the birth of a son. In Psalm 45 verses 6 to 7, Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.

The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.

Some have seen in this statement, a king being referred to as a god, perhaps akin to the way that the Lord describes Moses as like God to Pharaoh. Psalm 72 verse 17, May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed.

Here they argue the Psalmist wishes that a particular Davidic king would have an everlasting dominion. This would fit with statements like, O king, live forever. For this reason, they believe that these titles can be referred to a human king.

Other commentators, such as John Goldengay, have taken what most commentators take to be referring to titles for the king as being a long sentence referring to the Lord's activity. An extraordinary planner is the warrior God. The everlasting father is an officer for well-being.

This, he argues, is far more in keeping with the way that these names have worked elsewhere in the book. Meher shal al-Hashbaz, for instance, is not a title for the son. The name rather is a prophecy about what the Assyrians will do to the northern kingdom of Israel and to the Arameans.

Like many Jewish commentators, Goldengay argues that the child is probably King Hezekiah, the Davidic son who has just been born. He heralds the turn of the fortunes for the southern kingdom in the Syro-Ephraimite war. The sign of David's heir is an auspicious indicator of the positive destiny for a formerly oppressed nation, a galvanization of its sovereignty, and a promise of its enjoyment of peace in the years to come.

It does seem appropriate that in the first instance this promise should settle upon the character of Hezekiah. However, it is hard not to see the words of this chapter straining forward to some fulfilment far in the future, a more eschatological messianic figure, upon whom the full weight of these words can be borne. Naturally and appropriately, Christians have connected this with the character of Jesus.

If we take the name as a series of titles, they seem to divide into four. Wonderful Counselor relates to extraordinary wisdom and guidance, or perhaps wisdom to perform extraordinary things. Mighty God need not necessarily be taken as referring to the child himself as God.

As Gary Smith notes, many Hebrew names include the name of God within them. However, he suggests that the use of this same phrase in chapter 10 verse 21 suggests that the use of the title here should probably be given more weight. This son is identified

with God in some peculiar way.

Everlasting Father perhaps relates to the king as the father of his people. The everlasting father would be the one whose throne endured. It is perhaps surprising to have the one who is given as a son referred to as an everlasting father.

Prince of Peace is the final title. This king is going to bring a cessation of war. His people will know rest and security under his reign.

Some have suggested reading verse 7 as an expression of a wish that his kingdom would endure forever and that the Lord in his zeal would accomplish it. It seems better to me to read this as a prophecy of what the Lord would achieve. The Lord would, as he had promised within the Davidic covenant, ensure that the throne of David would endure.

He would do this in his zeal, his zeal as the God who kept his word and his promises. Themes of new birth are of course common within scriptural narratives. At key moments in biblical narratives and the story of the people of the Lord, a new dawn is seen to arrive with the birth of a child through divine favour and promise, shattering the gloom of a former darkness and serving as a propitious sign of a future that breaks with the oppression of the past.

This is most notably seen at the beginning of the book of Exodus, in 1st Samuel and later in the book of Luke. In each of these books we see an emphasis upon the labour of women and the manner in which they and the children that they bear are the means by which a new hope will arrive. Such themes are scattered throughout the book of Isaiah but perhaps most prominently within the two preceding chapters.

In chapter 7 verses 14 to 18 and chapter 8 verses 1 to 4 newborn children serve as signs of divine favour and coming deliverance. Later on in chapter 11 infants and young children are integral to Isaiah's vision of a promised era of miraculous peace, of a time when the little child leads lions, where nursing children play by the cobra's hole and weaned children put their hands in vipers dens. The future that the child represents is still far off and many challenges and difficulties lie between the present and that distant prospect.

The child however is an embodiment of the nation's hopes and he must be protected and nurtured like those hopes for many years before the future that he stands for can ever be realised. God's gift of a child is both a foretaste of the promised future and a commitment to provide in the interim. After the crushing blow that the northern kingdom of Israel had received from the Assyrians they presumed that they could rebuild again.

Indeed the calamity that had befallen them would provide them with the opportunity and occasion to build back on a greater scale and with better materials. Bricks would be replaced with dressed stones, sycamores with cedars. However the fundamental

weakness of the people, the pride upon which they're trying to build is still going to be their downfall.

The Lord is going to raise up enemies against them and frustrate them in their endeavours. His anger has not yet been spent upon the northern kingdom. Destruction would come upon them all of a sudden and it would hit every single part of the nation.

Those at the head and those at the tail, from the leading elders and nobles to the lying prophets, they would all be cut off. The corruption of the nation is comprehensive. Everyone is godless and an evil doer.

Every mouth speaks folly. The Lord would not assist their young men in battle. He would not even have compassion upon the fatherless and the widows among them.

There were no innocent parties. All would face destruction. In 722 BC the northern kingdom would finally fall to Assyria and yet the Lord's anger would still not yet be spent.

Verses 18 and 19 describe two fires. The fire of the people's wickedness that consumes the land and the fire of the Lord's wrath by which the land is also consumed. These two fires are of course related.

The first fire has brought the second fire upon them and the northern kingdom is devouring itself. Picard the son of Ramalai was assassinated by Hoshea. In this Hoshea was continuing a long tradition of assassination and intrigue in the northern kingdom.

For example Picard the son of Ramalai had also slain his predecessor. In addition to the northern kingdom devouring itself, it was also seeking to devour its brothers to the south, the kingdom of Judah. Despite the judgment and the destruction that the Lord had already brought upon the northern kingdom, his wrath was still against his people.

His hands still stretched out. A question to consider, how does the child whose birth is declared at the beginning of this chapter fulfill the promises of the Davidic covenant? Mark chapter 8 verses 11 to 38. And he cautioned them saying, And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread.

And Jesus aware of this said to them, Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? They said to him, twelve. And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And they said to him, seven. And he said to them, do you not yet understand? And they came to Bethsaida, and some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him.

And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. And when he had

spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, do you see anything? And he looked up and said, I see people, but they look like trees walking. Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

And he sent him to his home, saying, Do not even enter the village. And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, Who do people say that I am? And they told him, John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets.

And he asked them, But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, You are the Christ. And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him. And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Our passage in Mark chapter 8 is dominated by themes of perception and lack of perception. The Pharisees begin by asking Jesus for a sign, but he refuses to give them one. He has already given them more signs than they would know what to do with.

In Isaiah chapter 29 verses 13-14 we see something of this prophesied. And the Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. Jesus warns his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, which his disciples don't understand.

The point of Jesus' teaching is that teaching is like leaven, which when hidden in hearts produces loaves. Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Herodians and others, and introducing the new leaven of his word and his spirit. Leaven is like a tradition, it's passed on from loaf to loaf, and the disciples need to make a clean break

with the loaves of the religious and political leaders of Israel.

That theme of leaven also reminds us of the feast of unleavened bread, the leaving of Egypt, leaving behind that principle of life in Egypt, in cutting off the leaven. The disciples have to take the exact same approach to the teaching of the religious leaders of the nation. Yet the disciples start discussing the fact that they only have one loaf of bread, is that what Jesus is talking about? Jesus rebukes them for their failure to perceive.

They had only just been participants in two great miracles where bread was greatly multiplied. On both occasions they had gathered up an abundance of extra bread at the end, and yet here they are worrying that they might not have enough bread. They have eyes but aren't seeing, and ears but aren't hearing.

They aren't truly recognising whom they are serving. While they should resist the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, they should receive their bread from Jesus who distributes it to them. The healing of the blind man at Bethsaida that follows closely matches the healing of the deaf man in chapter 7 verses 31 to 37.

And if we pay close attention to the details of this passage, it will lead us to ask certain questions. Why does Jesus take him out of the village to heal him? Why does he say don't return to the village at the end? Why does he put spittle upon his eyes? Why is there a two-stage healing? Why does the man see men like trees walking? And a number of people have questioned the efficacy of Jesus' healing power. Jesus maybe just can't do this miracle enough so he needs to have a second go at it.

Maybe Jesus is using some traditional methods of healing and maybe, according to some, Jesus is not actually performing a miracle. He's just manipulating his eyes in a particular way to give him sight. Now if we think this passage is primarily about Jesus demonstrating his power and that that's all that's going on, the question of the two-stage miracle will become a keen one.

It will be quite difficult to answer because clearly the miracle does not seem to take the first time round. It only half works. Is Jesus lacking in miraculous power or is there a problem with the man, for instance? Maybe he has a lack of faith that is an obstacle or something along those lines.

I think what helps us here is recognising that the miracles are frequently also signs. In the Old Testament human beings are compared to trees. You have empires compared to great trees spreading out their branches for the birds of the air to live in.

Psalms 1 says that the righteous man is like a tree growing by streams of waters. Elsewhere in Scripture you have that sort of imagery taken up and the people of God are like a great forest. Perhaps what we're seeing in the two-stage healing is something

that's related to the two-stage healing.

The disciples are people who have just been blamed for a failure to see. They see but they do not perceive. There is a two-stage healing that needs to take place in them.

Their eyes have been opened to some degree and they see something about who Christ is but they don't see him clearly yet. They don't truly perceive his mission and what's going on with him. They don't see the kingdom mission.

What they probably see is like a group of trees walking around. A new group of men and women who will be like the forest of God but they don't truly appreciate what's happening. Maybe Mark is drawing upon the imagery of Isaiah where you have the images of trees growing up and being cut down.

All this forestry imagery. Jesus is the root that grows up out of dry ground. He's the branch growing out of Jesse.

So maybe that imagery is playing in the background. The man is taken out of the village. He's told as it were to follow Christ outside of the village and then Christ gives him his sight but he does not yet have true perception.

His eyes are opened but he does not yet truly perceive. He sees some things but he sees men walking around as if trees. So at this initial stage he's perceiving to a degree but there's a second stage of healing that must occur.

In the section that immediately follows this there's another case of people failing to perceive in a two-stage sort of testing. Jesus goes with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and he asks his disciples, who do people say that I am? They give him different answers and he presses them for a further revelation. And Jesus is told by Peter that he thinks that he is the Christ.

Yet even then Peter does not clearly perceive. As we see from what he says afterwards he tries to resist Christ going to his death in Jerusalem. Peter is another blind man who needs a two-stage healing.

I think then there might also be a clue as to why it's trees and why they're walking. This is the beginning of the walking segment or the way segment of Mark's gospel. They're on the way to Jerusalem and this comes at the very outset of the turn in the narrative towards Jerusalem.

This two-stage healing of a blind man introduces the section and at the very end of the section at Jericho just before he arrives at Jerusalem he sees Bartimaeus and heals him by the roadside. Another blind man. So that movement towards Jerusalem is framed by the healing of two blind people.

And as you read through the gospel more generally we can see that the image of blindness is used to reflect spiritual blindness. So the healing of the blind man is not just a demonstration of God's power over the elements, the physical body. It's a picture of the spiritual state of the disciples and others and what needs to still take place in them.

Those verses from Isaiah that Jesus alludes to are quite key within Mark and elsewhere in Luke and the other gospels. He talks about seeing you shall see and not perceive. It's the judgment upon Israel and even Jesus' disciples suffer from it to some extent.

All these things he's doing in front of them and yet they still cannot truly perceive who he is and what he's doing. Now why are they trees walking around? Maybe a clue is to be found in what Jesus says to his disciples in the crowd after he has rebuked Peter. If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Now the cross is such a familiar symbol to us that it's lost much of its weight. We probably don't think about it enough in terms of its associations and its particularity because it represents everything for us. It stands for all these things that are associated with Christianity and the weight of associations has led us to forget the particularity of its associations.

Sometimes even its association as an instrument of torture and imperial power. One of the things that we can forget is its association with wood. It's a tree and here this might be part of what's going on.

These are men expected to take up their cross and follow Jesus. So Jesus is walking around as it were with this big log on his back walking around like a tree and followed by other people who are walking with symbolic trees on their back ready to be crucified and the disciples vision and yet failure to perceive is associated with a broader failure to perceive that the cross is not just representing the crucifixion but what Christ will achieve there. The cross is not just a tree it's also the victory of Christ.

As they leave the village as they leave their background and follow Christ their eyes are initially opened and they see themselves as men carrying trees towards Jerusalem ready to be crucified but then there comes a later stage with the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the spirit at Pentecost as Jesus lays his hands on the man's eyes so he will give his holy spirit to them and their eyes will be opened to perceive in a new way and they will see it's not just men walking around as trees it's not just a wooden cross as an instrument of torture it's a means of victory and it's Christ leading his disciples to Jerusalem to suffering and death but finally towards victory. After the incident with the healing of the blind man Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. The masses seem to identify him with John the Baptist Elijah or one of the prophets.

Jesus' ministry very naturally follows from that of John the Baptist and has many resemblances to him and Elijah. Like Elijah and John Jesus spends much of his time in the

wilderness. The way he teaches the way he acts the miracles he performs are like the actions of the prophets.

Peter however confesses that Jesus is the Christ the anointed one the awaited messiah the disciples are strictly charged to tell no one. Once again the time will come to do so but it is not yet and at this point there's a transition in the narrative. Jesus begins to teach his disciples about his coming death teaching them in considerable detail.

He will not only be raised but he'll be raised on the third day. There doesn't seem to be a mention about the manner of his death though although you'll see later on he talks about taking up the cross. Peter then showing his lack of perception rebukes Christ.

He's playing the role of satan he's not actually possessed and Jesus' response to him in many ways it could be seen as get back in line. In 2nd Samuel chapter 19 verses 21 to 22 we have a similar statement and we see another way in which this is expressed in the incident in the garden of Gethsemane as Christ rebukes Peter for taking the ear of Malchus the high priest's servant. Those verses read Abishai the son of Zeruah answered shall not Shimei be put to death for this because he cursed the Lord's anointed but David said what have I to do with you you sons of Zeruah that you should this day be as an adversary to me shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day for do I not know that I am this day king over Israel.

Peter is the preeminent apostle and he still doesn't get it. Suffering is absolutely essential to Christ's identity and his vocation of the Messiah. To follow Christ requires denying yourself.

It requires the crucifixion of the ego the I that insists upon its own the I that insists upon what's due to it the I that insists upon its possessions its privilege its status all these things those must be sacrificed. We must be crucified with Christ so that it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us and the act of taking up our cross is marking ourselves out for death and by death. We are also bearing a mark that associates us with outsiders from the community from the political order.

We're being expelled from it we're being treated as rebels and revolutionaries and this cross is not just something that we submit to passively it's something that we take up in a committed act and we walk with it we walk with it behind Christ. We're following one who has taken up his own cross and his example is the one that we must follow. The one who would save his life will lose it.

The one who wants to gain the whole world but loses his soul loses that thing that is most precious. In taking up our cross we are disgorging ourselves from the order that holds us in thrall with possessions with status with honour with all these things that so occupy our thoughts and desires and we are becoming the living dead those who no longer have the stake that we once had within this existing order those who have given

up everything in order that we might gain what is most precious. A question to consider what are some of the things that you notice as you reflect upon the principles of honour and shame that are explored in verse 38.