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September 13th: Habakkuk 1 & Matthew 11

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Habakkuk's dismay at the rise of Babylon. Messengers from John.

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Transcript

Habakkuk chapter 1. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw. I hope you find this helpful, edifying, and encouraging. Thank you for joining us today.

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Thank you for joining us today. Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 Matthew Chapter 11 But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades.

For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you. At that time Jesus declared, For all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

In Matthew chapter 11 the twelve disciples have been sent away and Jesus is continuing his ministry. John has heard the accounts of Jesus' ministry but is himself in prison. John the Baptist preached an imminent judgment but Jesus is healing and restoring people.

And you can imagine John the Baptist is uncertain about whether Jesus is in fact the one awaited. He might be wondering where the promised fire is. He's expecting judgment to fall and yet he has someone going around healing and restoring, raising the dead, casting out demons, and it just doesn't seem to fit the bill.

The first part of this chapter focuses upon Jesus' identity and then that of John the Baptist. The key question is, are you the one who is to come? And the important thing to notice is that Christ is judging. Christ is bringing this judgment foretold by John the Baptist but he's doing so by showing mercy.

And he responds to John the Baptist's question with allusions back to the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 35 verse 5 we read, But in the previous context it reads, These things belong together. What Christ is bringing in his healing belongs with the judgment that he's bringing.

And we'll see more of that as the chapter proceeds. Jesus answers the question of John the Baptist in a way that highlights the relationship between judgment and mercy. Isaiah 61 is another passage being alluded to.

Jesus is fulfilling all these themes of restoration and healing that Isaiah foretold. But within it he's also bringing the vengeance and the judgment that John the Baptist foretold. By sending the messengers from John the Baptist back with this report, he wants John the Baptist to see that he is fulfilling all these different parts of the prophecies of the book of Isaiah.

And the other things are part of it. They will be understood in time as things play out. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

The point of Jesus' statement there is that he's doing all these healings, he's restoring in many ways. And the person who can see those things and thank God for them, rather than seeing those as an obstacle, is going to be blessed on that account. I don't think we should read this primarily as a rebuke to John the Baptist.

It's a statement of blessing to those who will truly understand what's taking place. And Jesus takes this occasion provided by the messengers from John to discuss the ministry of John more generally. Who was John? A reed shaken by the wind? Jesus here taking up an image that we find in places such as 1 Kings 14, verse 15.

The Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water and root up Israel out of this good land. A reed shaken by the wind is something or someone who is weak, easily moved or pressured or swayed this way or that by people around it. John the Baptist was not that.

He was not that sort of person at all. Was he a man dressed in soft clothing? The sort of person that you find in kings' houses? No, quite the opposite. He was dressed in the clothing that you associate with Elijah.

Camel skin and a leather belt. John the Baptist marks the transition between the age of the prophets and the age of the kingdom. And he is someone who was to prepare the way of the Lord in the wilderness.

And the kingdom ushers in a new period of violence, this conflict between the enemies of the kingdom, between Satan and his forces and the work of the kingdom which is pushing forward. He was Elijah who was to come. John the Baptist and Elijah are associated in their dress, in their behaviour.

John the Baptist was foretold in Malachi, the very last verses of our Old Testament, where we read, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. Like the first Elijah, John the Baptist is a man associated with the wilderness. He is a forerunner of a land prophet.

Elijah led up to Elisha and John the Baptist led to Jesus. He is a man clothed in camel skin

with a leather belt, similar to the way that John the Baptist is described in 2 Kings 1 verse 8. And there are further similarities to notice. Reading the story of Elijah we have a fierce prophet who declares a drought upon the land, who brings down fire from heaven to burn up opponents, who wins this great conflict on Mount Carmel and several other dramatic events.

And then God tells him at Mount Horeb that he is supposed to appoint a successor, and he is supposed to anoint two other people. And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you arrive you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shabbat of Abel-Mehola you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death.

Now, we're expecting this great figure who's going to bring all sorts of judgement, bring down judgement upon the people, and be this fierce warrior of Yahweh. But that's not actually what we find. When Elisha comes on the scene he multiplies loaves.

He's someone who heals people. He heals Naaman the Syrian from his leprosy. He raises from the dead.

He does all these things that we associate with Christ. And it might be surprising. This is not what we're expecting.

We're expecting this person to bring the sword, and yet he brings healing. However, even in those acts of blessing there is a judgement contained, and we see the same thing in Christ. John the Baptist and the Son of Man come in contrasting ways.

And yet the people of that generation reject both for different and perhaps contradictory reasons. They do not know the times. They do not know when it's the time to dance, when it's the time to mourn.

A couple of chapters earlier we saw an indication of this with the flute players at the death of the daughter of the ruler. Wisdom, however, is known by Hadids. I believe this should be seen as personified wisdom, and personified wisdom that's manifested in Christ and in John the Baptist.

In both cases they come and they act properly for the times, in accordance with the times. Jesus challenges the cities he has performed most of his works in to that point. It's a preparation for judgement.

These people have received great mercy, and it's in their response, or their failure to respond to that mercy, that their judgement is found. And so the judgement and the fire that John the Baptist foretold is happening through the separation that occurs as a result of the response to Jesus' works and the works of his disciples. We've seen in the previous

chapter that Jesus declares that as his disciples shake the dust off their feet in response to an unreceptive city, it will be worse for that city on the day of judgement than for Sodom and Gomorrah.

And he continues that theme here. Judgement through blessing and through mercy. He describes Capernaum, his home city, as the one that sought to be lifted up to heaven.

This should draw our mind back to Isaiah chapter 14 verses 13 to 14, where God addresses the king of Babylon. You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high.

I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the cloud. I will make myself like the Most High.

But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit. And Jesus declares the same thing of Capernaum, his home town. This all sets things up for Jesus' prayer to the Father, with which this chapter ends.

The Father, as the Lord of heaven and earth, is the one who reveals and who hides. He hides the truth from the proud who imagine themselves to be wise, while revealing things to the weakest and the most humble. All authority and all things have already been given to Christ.

And he is the one who passes on all that the Father has given him. And apart from him, there is no access to it, no access to the Father. He gives a promise of rest to those who accept his yoke, his teaching, or his law.

We can think about this in terms of the Sermon on the Mount. That's Christ's yoke, the teaching that he gives. And those who take that upon themselves will find that it brings rest.

Christ's commandments, as the Apostle says, are not burdensome. This might also be a reference back to Exodus chapter 33 verse 14, where God speaks about giving his presence and bringing them into rest. Another background for these statements might be found in intertestamental literature concerning wisdom.

For instance, in the book of Sirach chapter 51 verses 23 to 27, we find the words, Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction. Why do you say that you are lacking in these things? And why do you endure such great thirst? I opened my mouth and said, Acquire wisdom for yourselves without money. Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction.

It is to be found close by. See with your own eyes that I have laboured but little, and found for myself much serenity. There are probably allusions in this statement back to Isaiah chapter 55 verses 1 following.

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. And he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me, here that your soul may live. And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

The book of Sirach, taking up this biblical background, presents these words in the mouth of wisdom. And I think Jesus is doing the same thing. He's speaking, as it were, in the persona of wisdom, presenting her invitation to the people, that they should come and accept her words and find rest.

The sort of words that we find in the book of Proverbs chapter 9. The invitation of wisdom, and Christ is presenting it. Those who receive the words of Christ, though they may be babes, and not considered the wise of this age, will receive wisdom. They will receive the blessings that are promised to those who have the fear of the Lord, and answer the call of wisdom as she invites people to eat of her fare.

To learn of Christ is to learn in the way of wisdom. It's to learn from one who has the deeds of wisdom, that demonstrate that he knows the times. They will also find that his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and that he brings rest for their souls.

The point here is not that Christ lessens the law, detracts from its authority, or dismisses or undermines its demands. Christ has already made it very clear in the Sermon on the Mount that this is not in fact the case. So how exactly is this yoke easy and burden light? It seems to me that the answer is found in the fact that the master who places this upon us is gentle and lowly in heart.

He's one who reaches out to us in divine humility. He's the one who bears our burdens for us and with us. He's the one who is present with us in our struggles.

These are not burdens that we have to bear alone. He bears them for us and with us. And as a result, we find that the burden that we are bearing is one that has joy attached to it.

The burden of persecution, the burden of suffering, the burden of obedience, are burdens that he himself has borne. He invites us to bear them with him, to follow in his footsteps, to take up our crosses and to walk where he has walked before us. And that burden, though it might be the heaviest burden on earth to bear, is light when borne with him.

A question to consider. This chapter reveals a lot about the relationship between grace and judgment and the way in which rejected grace can be the means by which the most severe judgment is known. How does this fact shed light upon our relationship to

judgment as members of the household of God?