

Transcript Segment, Part 3
“Praying the ‘Our Father’ with Jesus”

Presented by Michael Simone, S.J.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” “Thy kingdom come” is the line that’s in both Matthew and Luke. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” is only in Matthew. I’m pretty sure, well, I shouldn’t say that. I’m pretty hopeful that these two verses come from Jesus’s appropriation of Ezekiel 34. I think Ezekiel 34 was motivating Jesus, because I see reflexes of it in a lot of the later descriptions of Jesus’s ministry. Again, we don’t have much that’s really authentically Jesus’s himself. So I want to look at the whole text, although I might edit it a bit for time. “Thus says the Lord, look, I myself will search for my sheep and examine them.” That’s a very unfortunate translation, but I think it gets it. He wants to count the hairs on their heads. As a shepherd examines his flock while he, himself, is among his scattered sheep, so “I will examine my sheep. I will deliver them from every place where they were scattered on the day of dark clouds. I will lead them out from the peoples, gather them from the lands.”

This is God restoring his nation, restoring his flock. If that doesn’t describe Jesus’s, well, if that doesn’t describe Matthew’s understanding of Jesus’s image and Luke’s understanding of Jesus’s ministry, I don’t know what does. “There they will lay down in good grazing land, in rich pastures. They will be pastured on the mountain of Israel. I, myself, will pasture my sheep. I will give them rest. The lost I will search out. The strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal. The sleek and the strong I will destroy,” this is the Old Testament, after all, “the sleek and the strong I will destroy, I will shepherd them with judgment.”

Now, Ezekiel seems to be pretty convinced that if you’re sleek and strong during this period of utter national catastrophe, you’re up to something bad. This is not Ezekiel writing during a period of peace and prosperity. This is Ezekiel writing during a period when everything was falling apart. You’ve taken what isn’t yours, or you’ve compromised with the conquerors, you’ve become a traitor in some way. And Jesus has some of this bias, too, because his social circumstances were similar to Ezekiel’s. “Go and sow what you have.” “Come and follow me.” “It is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” I think he’s working with some of Ezekiel’s same biases here. The sheep, the real sheep, the sheep that he needs to gather back together, are the scattered, lost, poor, suffering, the ones who need to be bound up and searched out and healed.

So now we get to this understanding of kingdom. “I will appoint one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David.” So when I said before that it might actually be noteworthy that Yahweh is the father of the Son of David, I look to this, and I think, well, I wonder if Jesus wasn’t inspired by this line. I wonder if Jesus didn’t in some way appropriate this as a way of thinking of his own ministry. I don’t know. Again, only working with primary sources so far. But to me it’s a noteworthy connection that I want to continue to pursue.

This ends with, “They shall dwell securely with no one to frighten them,” I think described the kind of kingdom Jesus was hoping for. I think his inspiration for what he talks about, when he talks about the

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Kingdom, and I think certainly the Evangelists. I always turn to Matthew because I'm assuming Matthew has a good knowledge of these texts, maybe better than Luke or Mark. Matthew certainly is drawing on images like this, and images in the final chapters of Isaiah to describe the kingdom of peace that comes as a result of Jesus's ministry.

Jesus is longing for his Father's return – well, longing for the divine return. How Jesus understood his own relationship to the Father is something I'll leave to the systematic theologians, the patristic authors. He's longing for the divine return, but he sees himself as this David character, who is going to pasture them, who is going to be the Good Shepherd, to retrieve the lost. I think this also accounts for his healing ministry and the importance of his healing ministry in his own work.

I think it also gives us some insights into why writers, especially of apocalyptic literature in the New Testament, talk about the "new heavens and the new earth," and scenes of judgment. All of this is there in Ezekiel 34. This is a passage, I think, that strongly motivated writers of New Testament work. I think it's probably lying behind much of what Jesus is talking about when he talks about the Kingdom. I think he's describing the Kingdom as it's described here.

Moving on. "Give us this day our daily bread." This, I think, is fairly straightforward. I think this is the manna in the desert. The only other daily bread that I could think of in the Hebrew Bible is the bread that's placed out before Yahweh in the Temple every night. I don't think that that's what Jesus is drawing on here. I don't think that's where the early Christians were turning their attention. Those kind of liturgical images, the Temple, liturgical images don't seem to really motivate a lot of the, or maybe inspire a lot of theological ideals of the early Christians. But what we do have is manna in the desert. "The Israelites said to Moses and Aaron, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread, if you have brought us out in this wilderness to kill us, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.' Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you,' (or maybe bread from the sky would probably be a better translation), 'and each day the people should go out and gather enough for that day. And that way I will test them to see whether they follow my instruction or not.'"

The tradition of bread from heaven, daily bread, starts with this idea of rebellion. I think that's important to note because as time goes on, the memory of manna, which comes up again and again and again in writings in the Hebrew Bible, it ceases to be tied to memories of rebellion and it more and more becomes a symbol, a very powerful symbol of unmerited divine grace. It's simply divine grace. We see this in Nehemiah 9:20: manna is an example of God's providence, along with the water from the rock, and divine instruction. By the time of Nehemiah, manna in the desert has already been coupled with divine instruction as the way God fed his people in the desert. Psalm 78, which recapitulates the entire Exodus story, talks about this as the "bread of angels." We don't get any of that from our first mention of it in Exodus, in fact, if anything, this is the response to a rebellion. But by the time we get to Psalm 78, it's the bread of angels. It's grain from heaven.

Wisdom 16, which is not written in Hebrew, and so cannot be called part of the Hebrew Bible, and might be written as late as the time of Christ, but gives us a window onto the tradition. Actually takes it, even, to the next level, that this was somehow some kind of mystic food, kind of like Greek ambrosia. It's provided to every pleasure and suited every need. There was some kind of almost magical property to it. Again, not part of the tradition. But by the time we get to Christ, it has become something different. It's a symbol purely of divine grace.

It's probably overworking the evidence, but you've been watching me do that now for 38 minutes, so I think I see Jesus committed to a certain kind of divine grace. It's noteworthy that in Joshua 5:12, manna ceased on the day when they first ate the produce of the land. So when the Israelites came in and took the land and became farmers, essentially, the manna ceased. Jesus, in his own day, would

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have understood the manna, I think, as just unmerited pure divine grace, not dependent on something like the land, which by his time the Israelites would have known that they could lose because they had lost it by that point, and then regained it, but were about to lose it again.

There's something in Jesus's mind here. I think he wants to go back to that desert experience of simply the dependency on pure grace as a way of understanding the material goods that he receives in his ministry. I think that's there. It's, again, just a hunch, but I think it's there. So that's where my mind is with that particular verse.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." I think this is a lot about . . . I like that Matthew talks about debt here. We say trespasses, but the original word could also mean debt. Luke, by the way, changes the word trespasses, or debt, to sins. "Forgive us our sins as we, ourselves, forgive everyone indebted to us." That's how Luke rereads it.

I don't think it's about sins or crimes in Jesus's mouth. This is an injection of my own piety here, but I don't believe Jesus sinned. I think that's a necessary theological trope. So what exactly is he talking about? I think that the fear of debt is deeply ingrained into the mind of Israel. For this, I turn to Rainer Albertz's books, the *History of the Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*. He goes into great detail about what debt slavery did to the Israelite economy, what it did to Israelite society, and how it weakened Israel repeatedly, and allowed foreign invasion.

Amos 8:4 is probably a good description of this: "Hear this, you who trample the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land, saying 'when will the new moon be festival be over so that we may sell grain, or the Sabbath, that we may offer our wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'"

Unpaid debts became cause for bondage and servitude, was something that was very common all throughout the ancient Near East, but something that in Israel seemed to run very counter to the egalitarian notions with which Israel was first founded. For this, again, I'm very reliant on Rainer Albertz's description of early Israel as an egalitarian society, although archeology bears that out. There doesn't seem to be any hierarchization in Israelite society until a much later period.

The fear of debt and the fear of what debt does is something that's very deep, and I think Jesus is praying that it end. I think Jesus is praying that something like the Levitical Jubilee mark his own attitude toward his brothers and sisters, and something like the Levitical Jubilee be a common way of dealing with need and debt and lending and giving. I think, again, might be overworking the evidence. But there seems to be something of Leviticus 25 in this. So the Jubilee year, just to rehash what it is, all land that's been sold actually turns out just to have been leased for 49 years, and returns to its original owners. All debts are forgiven, and all debt slaves are set free. Now, that doesn't mean all slaves, but everyone who's in slavery because of a debt is set free. I think this is the deeper understanding of these verses. Now, we take them today to be about sin and forgiveness, and I think the way we understand forgiveness, in a personal forgiveness in our society, I think that's actually a useful way of looking at it. But keeping in mind that the deeper notion here was this kind of radical freedom from obligation to other, and radical freedom from others' obligation to us. I think this is what Jesus is getting at in his prayer. But about this I have less confidence than I do that Ezekiel 34 underlies a lot of what he says about kingdom.