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Alastair Roberts

Good and bad figs. Paul's non-exercise of his freedom.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 24. After Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem, Jechoniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon, the Lord showed me this vision. Behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord.

One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. And the Lord said to me, What do you see, Jeremiah? I said, Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten. Then the word of the Lord came to me.

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down.

I will plant them and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. But thus says the Lord, Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt.

I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers. Jeremiah chapter 24 likely begins a new section of the book, after the material related to the kings and the prophets in chapters 21-23.

The historical context of this chapter is between the first deportation to Babylon in 597 BC and the second deportation in 586. King Jehoiachin, also called Keniah or Jeconiah, his officials, his craftsmen, and other leading figures in the land, had all been taken away and were in exile, never to see the land of Judah again. And now Zedekiah his uncle is on the throne of Judah, he will be the last of the kings before the final exile.

The first deportation had left Judah without many of the people who would be useful in warfare. The kingdom as it remains is very weak. The vision that the Lord shows to Jeremiah here has two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord.

Perhaps these are actual figs that the Lord is directing Jeremiah's attention to, or they may just be within a vision. That they are placed before the temple of the Lord suggests that they might be offerings, perhaps the first fruits of some worshippers. However these figs need to be inspected as they are of clearly contrasting quality.

Jeremiah notes that one of the baskets is full of very good figs, first ripe figs. The other basket however has extremely bad figs that are completely inedible. Part of the background that we must consider for this prophecy is the fact that Judah is the tree of the Lord's planting and the Lord wants fruit from it.

The inspection in this vision then would very naturally fit with the Lord's inspection of his people and their works. If you were to consider the two groups of Jews, those who had been deported from Judah to Babylon in 597 BC with Jehoiachin and those associated with Zedekiah who were still in the land, or those who had gone to Egypt, you would presumably think that the latter were the more fortunate ones in escaping the deportation. The Lord had clearly shown some mercy upon them, sparing them from the fate that their fellow Jews who had been deported to Babylon had suffered.

Yet the vision the Lord gives to Jeremiah here turns this picture on its head. The actual good figs are the Babylonian exiles, not those still in Judah or those who have escaped to Egypt. In describing them as the good figs, the Lord does not seem to be making a statement about their moral character.

Jehoiachin and the men with him were not righteous men. However, those who remained were worse and a greater judgement awaited them. In referring to Jehoiachin and those around him as the good figs, the Lord is making a statement about their fate, not so much their current moral character.

He says that he will regard them as good and this is because he has set his eyes upon them for good. He is going to restore them. The language of Jeremiah's commission back in chapter 1 recurs here.

I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not pluck them up. The promise given concerning the good figs here is essentially the promise of the new covenant.

The Lord will give them a heart to know that he is the Lord. This had been the failure of the kings. They had not known the Lord in the way that they had failed to exercise justice and righteousness.

But when they return to the land, there will be righteousness and justice among them. This will ultimately be achieved, not by the repentance that the people themselves will initiate, but by the Lord's gracious work towards them. Such a promise is also found in Ezekiel chapter 11 verses 17 to 21.

Therefore say, thus says the Lord God, I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations, and I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God. A few chapters later in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34, Jeremiah will give his famous prophecy concerning the new covenant.

Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the

Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. This promise goes back a long way, that the Lord would take the initiative after their exile, restore their heart and bring them back to the land.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1-6, the failure of Israel to keep the covenant is foretold, but also their restoration after exile. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice and all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you, if your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven. From there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. The hope of Judah lies not in the city of Jerusalem, not in those who are still the remnant within the land, but far away in the land of Babylon. As for those still in the land, they are like the bad figs that are completely inedible.

Zedekiah, his officials, and all the remnant of Jerusalem are fit only to be spat out of the land. Those who did not follow the Lord's instruction and went to take refuge in Egypt will also be lost. Israel was called to be a light to the world, and however Israel lived its life, it would serve as a spectacle to the surrounding nations.

If they were faithful, the nations would be amazed at their wisdom. If they were unfaithful, the peoples would see God's justice in judging them. Here the remnant of Jerusalem will suffer that fate, with Zedekiah their leader.

Their fate will become an object of comment for all the nations of the world. There is an accumulation of terms here. There will be a horror, a reproach, a byword, a taunt, a curse.

People will comment upon the judgment that they have suffered, and consider what they must have done to have suffered such a dreadful fate. The terms we read here are found elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, along with other ones like desolation, a curse word, a ruin, an object of hissing. All of this fulfills the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 37.

And you shall become a horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away. A question to consider. The people who were taken away to Babylon with Jehoiachin are described as good figs, because the Lord has set his eyes

upon them for good.

They were deported on account of their sins, but yet can still be described as good. The description of them as good seems to anticipate what God is going to do with them. He is going to give them the heart to know that he is the Lord, and they will be his people, he will be their God, the famous covenant formula.

They will return to him with their whole heart. These are good figs, but they are figs that have been made good by the Lord. How might reflecting upon this help us better to understand our standing before God? and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting, for necessity is laid upon me.

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I

may share with them in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

So I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. Starting 1 Corinthians chapter 9 we seem to be engaging in a strange digression from Paul's argument. Paul seems to be moving into a completely unrelated subject.

One moment he's talking about idol food, the next he's talking about his rights as an apostle. Perhaps, however, we don't notice this shift. We may be so used to breaking Paul up into verses and chapters that we don't think about the larger flow of his arguments.

But it does matter at points like this. Paul has not left his point behind. He's approaching it indirectly through his own experience.

And the point of this chapter is to raise a secondary issue, the question of his rights and support as an apostle, and then using that to address a primary issue. The issue of idol food is still very much the issue here, it's the point, and it will remain the issue right through the whole of chapter 10. The main point of this chapter is not to defend Paul, but to exhort the Corinthians to learn from Paul's practice in regard to financial support and to bring that to bear upon their relation to the issue of idol food.

The previous chapter had ended with a striking claim, therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. And one can imagine people reacting against this claim. Our reaction is against this claim.

Why should our rights be held hostage by other people in such a manner? The natural response then is to insist upon our freedom, our right to eat what we want, and not to compromise that for anyone else, our rights are our rights. Paul lists at this point a number of his credentials as an apostle. He's seen the risen Christ, he's founded the Corinthian church, and the Corinthians should be the first to recognise his apostolic claim, since they are the direct beneficiaries of his ministry.

Paul, of all people, as an apostle, should be free, and he makes a deft rhetorical move here. Does he not have the right to eat and drink as a free apostle? This relates what he's saying to the argument of chapter 8, but also relates to the question that he raises in this chapter about his support in his ministry. He has to make his living, he has to eat and drink, and he needs the money to do so.

Behind Paul's use of rights language here is verse 9 of the preceding chapter. The issue in the preceding chapter was the Corinthians' rights, and now Paul talks about his own

rights, and how he has exercised those rights in his dealings with them. The other apostles are supported in a way that enables them to take wives with them.

Paul is unmarried, and has to work for his own support, like Barnabas. He presents a series of analogies that show the strangeness of this situation. It's like the soldier fighting on his own expense, or the vineyard planter who can't taste the fruit of his vineyard, or the shepherd that cannot enjoy the milk of the flock.

Beyond these analogies, the law itself presents the principle of not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain. And Paul makes clear here that this is a symbolic commandment. In Deuteronomy chapter 25 it's related to the right of the man performing the levirate marriage to enjoy the use of his dead brother's property while he is raising up seed for him.

It's also connected with those working in the temple, and maybe we should see some connection here. Those working in the temple were working on a site that had been built upon the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. And the priests of course were symbolically connected with oxen in the sacrifices.

They were the oxen working on the threshing floor, and they were entitled to eat of the sacrifices that were offered there. As they prepared the grain of God's people for the Lord, they were entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour. And it would seem that this same logic would apply to Paul.

In his ministry, he has the right to enjoy the benefits of his work. He should be able to be funded or supported by his labours as a missionary. However, in dealing with the Corinthians, Paul did not exert this.

In other cases he did take funding, but not with them. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 7-9, For the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need, so I refrained, and will refrain, from burdening you in any way. Teachers like Paul could be supported in a number of different ways.

They could charge fees. Certain philosophers would go around and charge fees for their speeches. Others would be supported by a wealthy patron, which had problems because they would be beholden to that person, and possibly end up being compromised in their ability to tell the truth.

A third type of philosopher went around begging, supporting themselves by pestering the general population for funds. There was, however, a fourth option, and Paul took this one when dealing with the Corinthians. This was to support oneself.

In Acts chapter 18 verses 1-3 we read, After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went

to see them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent-makers by trade. Paul's point in taking this approach is not to place a burden on the Corinthians.

And this passage isn't placing pressure on the Corinthians to offer such support. He's not blaming them at this point. He's not saying that they need to mend their ways and start to give him money.

Indeed, Paul goes on to make the most startling of claims. He said he would rather die than be deprived of his boast. What is his boast? It's his stewardship of the Gospel.

He is not a mercenary. He's a man with a God-given vocation. And in declaring the Gospel free of charge, as a servant of Christ, he displays the Gospel in his actions.

Christ himself didn't exert his prerogatives, but he laid them aside to go to the cross. Paul has become a servant to all in order to win as many as possible. He's not in it for himself.

He's not in it to make a profit. He's in it as a servant. He becomes like the Jews to win the Jews.

He becomes like those under the law to win those under the law. He becomes like those outside of the law to win them, and like the weak to win them. He becomes like the Jews.

It's a strange thing to say, because Paul himself is a Jew. However, he has ceased to be what he once was. He is no longer defined by his old way of life.

And so when he relates to the Jews as a Jew, he is stepping back into an old form of life that he is no longer defined by. He no longer sees himself primarily as someone of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He is now a man in Christ.

It is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him. He becomes like those under the law. He's no longer under the law in the sense that he once was, but if it makes it easier to win people for Christ who are under the law, he will act as one under the law.

He also becomes like those outside of the law, while clarifying that he is still under the law of Christ. This is a new law he lives in terms of, the law set by Christ's own pattern and example. Finally, he becomes like the weak, and in this he presents an example to the strong in Corinth.

He wants to protect the weak. He wants to win them for the gospel. And this is in great contrast to those who are prepared to destroy them for the sake of their knowledge, a knowledge that puffs up and does not build up.

And all of this is for the sake of the gospel. Paul is a steward of the gospel, and he wants to be faithful in his stewardship. He concludes by exhorting the Corinthians to see

themselves like athletes.

Athletes control and limit themselves in order to win a prize. And the Christians should be the same. The strong should be like athletes.

They follow Paul's example. They discipline themselves for the sake of the goal that really matters. It's the growth of the kingdom, and being faithful to the stewardship of the gospel that is committed to us.

And if that requires that we do not exert our rights, then we do not exert our rights. A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching in this chapter challenge our notions of freedom and rights?