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August 31st: 2 Samuel 18 & Ephesians 1:1-14

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The death of Absalom. God's purpose from before all ages realized in Christ.

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

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Transcript

2 Samuel chapter 18. Then David mustered the men who were with him, and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent out the army, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite.

And the king said to the men, I myself will also go out with you. But the men said, You shall not go out, for if we flee, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us.

But you are worth ten thousand of us. Therefore it is better that you send us help from the city. The king said to them, Whatever seems best to you I will do.

So the king stood at the side of the gate, while all the army marched out by hundreds and by thousands. And the king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, Deal gently for my

sake with the young man Absalom. And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders about Absalom.

So the army went out, into the field against Israel, and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. And the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the loss there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country, and the forest devoured more people that day than the sword.

And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. And his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

And a certain man saw it and told Joab, Behold I saw Absalom hanging in an oak. Joab said to the men who told him, What, you saw him? Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt. But the man said to Joab, Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, for my sake protect the young man Absalom.

On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life, and there is nothing hidden from the king, then you yourself would have stood aloof. Joab said, I will not waste time like this with you. And he took three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak.

And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him. Then Joab blew the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained them. And they took Absalom and threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones.

And all Israel fled, every one to his own home. Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself the pillar that is in the king's valley. But he said, I have no son to keep my name in remembrance.

He called the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's monument to this day. Then Ahimeaz the son of Zadok said, Let me run and carry news to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the hand of his enemies. And Joab said to him, You are not to carry news today.

You may carry news another day, but today you shall carry no news, because the king's son is dead. Then Joab said to the Cushite, Go, tell the king what you have seen. The Cushite bowed before Joab and ran.

Then Ahimeaz the son of Zadok said again to Joab, Come what may, let me also run after the Cushite. And Joab said, Why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no

reward for the news? Come what may, he said, I will run. So he said to him, Run.

Then Ahimeaz ran by the way of the plain, and out ran the Cushite. Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall. And when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone.

The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, If he is alone, there is news in his mouth. And he drew nearer and nearer.

The watchman saw another man running. And the watchman called to the gate and said, See, another man running alone. The king said, He also brings news.

The watchman said, I think the running of the first is like the running of Ahimeaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man and comes with good news. Then Ahimeaz cried out to the king, All is well.

And he bowed before the king with his face to the earth and said, Blessed be the lord your God who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king. And the king said, Is it well with the young man Absalom? Ahimeaz answered, When Joab sent the king's servant your servant, I saw a great commotion, but I do not know what it was. And the king said, Turn aside and stand here.

So he turned aside and stood still. And behold the Cushite came. And the Cushite said, Good news for my lord the king, for the lord has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you.

The king said to the Cushite, Is it well with the young man Absalom? And the Cushite answered, May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man. And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would I had died instead of you.

O Absalom, my son, my son. In chapter 17 the lord had used Hushai the archite to prostrate the council of Ahithophel who then went out and killed himself. Now in chapter 18 while Absalom and his men play out the council of Hushai, an overwhelming attack with men mustered from all over Israel covering the face of the earth, David and his men adopt tactics similar to those suggested by Ahithophel, a more strategic strike that separates the leader from his men.

Ahithophel's council had sought to isolate David and by killing him to destroy his cause. However this is exactly what happens to Absalom. David divided his forces into three, much as Gideon's forces were divided back in Judges chapter 7 verse 16 and Saul's in 1 Samuel chapter 11 verse 11.

Hushai's council to Absalom that he muster a force from the entirety of Israel had been

designed to buy David significant time. It would take quite some time to gather people from Dan to Beersheba and to bring them all together over the Jordan to attack David. While Ahithophel had sought to pursue David immediately and without delay with men that were already gathered, destroying him while he was exhausted, disheartened and in a position of greater vulnerability, Hushai's plan gave David the time to cross the Jordan, to receive relief and support from Transjordanian allies, to muster a much larger fighting force and to find greater defence of security in some fortified city.

Ahithophel's plan had been to divide David from the men and to pick him off, bringing an end to the war and so recognising this danger David's men did not want him to accompany them into the battle lest he be killed and everything come to nothing. However by Hushai's false council Absalom leads his men into battle and puts himself into a position of considerably greater vulnerability which he would not have been in had he followed Ahithophel's advice. This makes it possible to overcome Absalom's coup with one effective blow.

David had given explicit instructions concerning the life of one man in the battle, that of his son Absalom. Joab, Abishai and Ittai the Gittite, the commanders of the three parts of David's army, were all instructed concerning Absalom in the hearing of the wider people. Earlier, of course, David had given instructions concerning the life of Uriah to Joab, desiring Joab to ensure that Uriah's life was taken.

Now he requests mercy from Joab to ensure that the life of his son is not taken. The battle itself was fought in the forest of Ephraim between the men of Israel, presumably largely the people from the northern tribes, and the men of David, chiefly men of Judah and allies from the Transjordan, both Gentiles and Israelites. 20,000 men were killed and as in several other biblical accounts, such as the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea or the battle of Deborah and Barak against Sisera, nature itself fights on behalf of God's people.

The forest devoured more people of Absalom's men than the sword. Back in chapter 14, the hair of Absalom was described to us as his most notable feature. In verses 25-26 of that chapter, Absalom is described here like a ram that is shorn annually and his hair weighed.

His hair is cut at the time of sheep-shearing at the end of the year. Now this feature becomes his downfall. The sons of the king rode mules, but when Absalom's hair gets caught in the oak, the mule went out from beneath him.

He is unseated from his mule, as he will be unseated from the throne. Much as Ahithophel ended up hanging himself in the preceding chapter, so Absalom, the man who started the coup, is left hanging like his chief advisor. Given the judgement upon David, with the repayment of four sheep for the one that he stole from the poor man Uriah, perhaps we are supposed to see Absalom as the unblemished ram.

Note the description of him as being without blemish, from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. The unblemished ram, the son of David is caught in the tree and he will die in David's place. A man brings news to Joab that Absalom is hanging from the tree, and Joab asks him why he didn't kill him, so that he might be rewarded with ten pieces of silver and a belt.

Yet the man had heard the instruction of David to his commanders, and he was not going to go against the word of the king. He knows that if he had taken Absalom's life, Joab, being a treacherous man, would have allowed him to take all of the blame and the punishment, while Joab himself would escape scot-free. Joab himself runs Absalom through with three javelins, and then Joab's armour bearers surround Absalom and kill him.

Joab calls all the men back from the battle. They have won the victory at this point, the usurper has been killed, and the coup is over. They take Absalom down from the tree, put him in a pit, and cover it up with a great heap of stones.

Hanging dead upon the tree, Absalom was marked out as a man who was cursed, and being buried under a great heap of stones, he reminds us of Achan and others whose deaths were marked out as a cautionary reminder for future generations. In these two details, we might be reminded of Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 18-23. First of all, verses 22-23 read, And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.

You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. This commandment, however, comes immediately after another, in verses 18-21 of the chapter, which refers to the rebellious son. If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and though they discipline him will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice, he is a glutton and a drunkard.

Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones, so you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear and fear. Absalom suffers the death of the cursed man, hanging on a tree, and he ends up in a pit covered up with stones, like the man who is the rebellious son. The manner in which his body is treated then is a symbolic declaration of the character of his crimes.

Joab was probably right to recognise that if Absalom was left alive there would be a continued threat to David's kingdom. David is getting old and he is already weak and he is going to die very soon. If Absalom is left alive there will be a continued uncertainty about the succession and there would be the possibility of another coup.

By having many people present at the death there could be a claim that there was such a commotion that no one knew who took his life and that way there would be plausible deniability for all involved. An interesting detail is mentioned here that Absalom in his lifetime set up a pillar for himself in the king's valley because he had no son to keep his name in remembrance. This seems to be at odds with the detail that we find in chapter 14 verse 27 where he is mentioned as having three sons and a daughter called Tamar.

Perhaps we are to imply that his sons died prematurely, much as Judah's sons died at the beginning of Genesis chapter 38 perhaps and also as David's sons have been dying. The detail is significant at this juncture though because Absalom's name and lineage is completely wiped out at this point. With Absalom's death his whole line dies.

Ahimeas, the son of Zadok, wants to bring the news back to the king. It is not entirely clear whether Ahimeas knows that Absalom is dead. If he does know that he is dead he brings a deceptive report when he speaks to the king and suggests uncertainty in the matter.

Rather it is possible that Joab's response to him in verse 20 should not include because the king's son is dead in quotation marks. That was the reason why Joab did not want to send him but Ahimeas may not himself have known of the fact. Ahimeas seeing the commotion and knowing that victory had been achieved might just presume that Absalom had been captured.

He was well aware that the king had instructed that nothing should happen to Absalom and he might just presume that the king's wishes would be honoured. Joab sends a Cushite, presumably a man of Ethiopia to bear the news instead. He will bring David both news of the victory and news of the death of Absalom.

On two previous occasions in the book of 2 Samuel David had taken the lives of messengers who sought praise for the demise of some of his enemies, the Amalekites' news of the death of Saul at the battle of Gilboa and Rechab and Bayanah's news of their assassination of Ish-bosheth. Perhaps Joab does not want to put the innocent Ahimeas in the middle of this situation and so sends a foreigner instead. However Ahimeas insists on bearing the news and he ends up running ahead of the Cushite and bringing the news to David.

The news is clearly news of a victory. The whole army is not running towards the city but just one man. The story relates the coming of the messengers with considerable suspense, the watchmen watching from the walls and David eagerly awaiting for the news of the battle.

When Ahimeas brings the news it is news of peace. The Lord has delivered up the enemies of David. However in this situation the thing that David really cares about is the fate of his son.

Is it well with the young man Absalom? Ahimeas doesn't know. And then the Cushite arrives with his news. He tells again of the victory but then adds the detail that Absalom has died.

David's response is to go up to his chamber above the gate and weep. He goes between heaven and earth as his son died between heaven and earth. He is distraught over the news.

He has won this great victory, the coup is over. But yet with the death of his son it means almost nothing to him. He would rather he had died rather than Absalom his son.

Of course Absalom his son had ultimately died in part because of David's own sin. David's sin with Bathsheba and the punishment the Lord declared upon it started the balls rolling that would ultimately lead to the coup of Absalom. And in Absalom's own death we saw hints of Absalom as a sort of sacrificial lamb taking the place of David.

The physically unblemished ram and the son of David dies so that David himself will not die. There is a sort of poetic justice here as well. Earlier on in chapter 11 David had given explicit instructions to Joab to kill one man in the battle.

And here he had given instructions to spare one man in the battle. On that previous occasion he had given little thought to the other people who had to die in order that the murder of Uriah and his sin of adultery might be covered up. Now once again through the actions of Joab this sin comes back upon his head.

Now many lives are spared but the one life he cares about is lost. David's fatherly affection for Absalom reminds us of the story of Jacob. In the latter part of David's life he plays out the tragedy of Jacob as the bereaved father.

And here David mourns for Absalom much as Jacob had mourned for Joseph. The death of the dearly beloved son bringing him down to the grave in sorrow. David is the king of Israel in a moment when he has just won the great victory over his enemies and all he cares about is his rebel son.

It's quite inappropriate. David's failure to exercise proper discipline over his sons and his indulgence of them has produced this situation and now his overly indulgent fatherly love is preventing him from playing the part of the king on a day of great national victory and the restoration of the kingdom. In David's tragic words of grief that end this chapter, Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, would I had died instead of you.

Oh Absalom, my son, my son. We are hearing the words of someone who is tasting the bitterest fruit of his previous sin. Even as a forgiven man the tragic fruit of David's sin is coming upon his head here.

A question to consider. What do you think was going through the mind of Joab in this

chapter? Ephesians chapter 1 verses 1 to 14. Pull an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will. To the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.

According to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will. According to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him. Things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. So that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in him were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory.

The book of Ephesians was likely an apostolic encyclical, a circular letter sent to various churches in the region of Asia Minor. Unlike other Pauline epistles it does not greet anyone and besides Paul only mentions the name of Tychicus who is its bearer. There is no treatment of specific issues in a congregation and it deals with the more general themes of the gospel message.

It is possible that it is the letter referred to as the letter from the Laodiceans in Colossians chapter 4 verse 16. In Marcion's canon the epistle to the Ephesians is referred to as to the Laodiceans. The form of verse 1 suggests that some reference to a place name was contained in the original.

We might speculate that it was left blank in the master copy of the encyclical and filled in differently for whichever church it was addressed to. Presumably the Ephesians copy of this more general encyclical is the one that has come down to us in Scripture. Some have suggested that the association with Ephesus might have arisen from the fact that Ephesus was a particularly important city for the early church.

Paul visited it on a number of occasions a few of which visits are recorded in Acts chapter 18 to 20. It was a larger city with a sizable Jewish population. The careful reader

of Ephesians will be struck by a number of close parallels between the letters of Colossians and Ephesians.

There are several chunks that are substantially similar in both. Almost the entirety of Ephesians chapter 1 is just two sentences verses 3 to 14 is a single 202 word sentence. It's the longest in the entirety of the Pauline corpus.

Paul begins the epistle in a very familiar manner. He identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. He is someone sent on a divinely appointed mission.

He wishes grace to them and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, a typical Pauline greeting. The sentence that comprises the entire rest of our section is introduced with the words blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a statement of praise adopting a form that could be found in synagogue worship and elsewhere.

The opening clauses are all about blessing. Paul blesses God the Father because God the Father has blessed us in Christ and he has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. The extent of the blessing is remarkable.

Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places suggests that there is no spiritual blessing that we lack. These blessings are spiritual coming from the Spirit of God. They are granted and enjoyed in Christ.

Christ is the realm to which these blessings belong. God's blessings go all the way back to the very beginning. God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.

It is important that we pay attention to what Paul is saying here. When we read such statements we can often instinctively translate them into abstract theology. Paul is teaching, we suppose, the doctrine of election that God elected a certain set of individuals before the foundation of the world.

But Paul isn't speaking about certain individuals here. He is speaking about us. Election isn't about an abstract group of individuals of unknown identity in this place.

It's about the Church. God chose the Church in Christ before the foundation of the world. A further thing to notice is that this isn't just about some timeless way of salvation.

The people who were chosen are not all believers throughout all ages but the people of God formed in Christ in the fullness of time. The point that Paul is making here is that the in-Christ people that God has intended to form from the very beginning, from before the very beginning, has now at this very point in history been unveiled. Now we see, revealed to the entire world, God's long-hidden purpose.

God's choice of us was for a purpose, in order that we might be holy and without blame

before him. We are a people who have been set apart to God so that we might live renewed lives that bear the mark of his holiness. Paul's statement about election here might remind us of the sorts of statements that we find in the Old Testament in places such as Deuteronomy chapter 7 verses 6 to 8. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God.

The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

At the heart of the doctrine of election that Paul presents here, as in the case of Moses' account of election in Deuteronomy, is the great and utterly unmerited grace of God. We were chosen, but there was nothing in ourselves to merit that choice, nothing that would distinguish us from anyone else so as to make us fitting recipients of God's goodness. Although many people focus Paul's doctrine of election upon individuals, I think this is misguided, especially at this point.

The focus is upon the new Jew and Gentile people of God formed in Jesus the Messiah. Moses' teaching about election was about God's choice of a body of people, not so much of the individuals that comprised it. And I think the same is true about Paul's.

As we are in Christ, we find ourselves bang in the centre of the great story of the entire cosmos. But that story was always about Christ and God's eternal purpose to form a people in him, rather than about God choosing a certain set of individuals and then determining that Christ would be the means to redeem them, as some have supposed. God's intent underlies everything else.

God's purpose was not merely concerned with the end of our being a holy and blameless people before him, but with the means by which this would be achieved. By God's will, he carries out his intentions and will bring them to their desired end. If election chiefly concerned the end of the purpose, predestination concerns the means.

And the means is adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ. Our status as a chosen and holy people is achieved as we are adopted through Jesus Christ, being made to participate in his sonship. The blessings that we enjoy are enjoyed in Christ, the beloved son.

He is the elect one, revealed in the fullness of time for us, so that we might enjoy the status of sons. And we have security in God's purpose and the sovereignty of his grace. God will realize his purpose planned before the ages began and he will bring it to a certain completion.

And we are going to be beneficiaries. Christ is at the heart of the entire purpose of God. In Christ we have redemption through his blood that has been shed for us.

We were rescued by his cross. Our debt was paid. We were bought back for God.

In Christ we have forgiveness of our trespasses. All the charges that were against us have finally been dealt with, all according to God's immense grace which he has lavished freely upon us. In Christ the mystery of God's will is made known, in a way that brings us into possession of deep wisdom and insight.

In Christ God's great plan for the cosmos, to unite all things in him, has been unveiled. In Christ we have an inheritance, or perhaps are an inheritance, God's own possession, by the secure operations of the God who works all things according to his will. God is going to fulfill his purpose.

He is not going to fail. And this will all be to the praise of God's glory. We were made participants in all of this when we heard the message of Christ, as we heard of his lordship and of his kingdom, and as we believed in him responding to that message.

We were sealed with the Holy Spirit, marked out as those who will receive the full inheritance. The Spirit is a down payment or a guarantee of a greater inheritance that still awaits us. Once again this is all to the end of God's glory.

Christ is at the very heart of this account of salvation. At every single step of the process of God's grace being worked out, it is in Christ. From the very beginning when we are chosen in him before the foundation of the world, to the time of final realisation when all things are gathered together in Christ.

The entire portrait of God's cosmic purpose, of which salvation is just a part, is all drawn around Christ. Christ is the one in whom the will of the Father is being worked out. Do we want to know what God's will is? We must look to Christ.

Christ is the one in whom the will of God is revealed. Do we want to know who are chosen? The people who belong to God. Look to Christ.

If we are in Christ, it is in him that we'll find certainty of our election. Do we want to know if we are loved by God? Look to Christ. He is the beloved.

If we are in him, then we have every spiritual blessing in him. We are granted by God's grace to participate in the love with which the Father loves him. And all of the work of Christ redounds to the glory of God.

It leads to the praise of the Father. Everything comes from the Father, from his purpose. It is achieved in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, the one who seals us.

And then it leads back to God the Father, in the praise of his glory that arises from all of

these things. A question to consider. What difference does it make to draw our portrait of election around Christ?