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November 23rd: Psalms 61 & 62 & Acts 20:1-16

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The song of the king. The raising of Eutychus.

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

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Transcript

Psalms 61, to the Choir Master with stringed instruments, of David. You have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. Prolong the life of the King.

May his years endure to all generations. May he be enthroned forever before God. Appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over him.

So will I ever sing praises to your name, as I perform my vows day after day. Psalm 61 is a psalm of trust and a prayer for deliverance. The psalmist begins by calling for God to pay attention to his cry.

He calls from the end of the earth, whether from a great distance from the house of the Lord, in a situation of exile or on a foreign campaign, or perhaps from an internal sense of feeling far removed from the light of God's presence. He is weak and faint, and in such a condition it is to God and the power and refuge that he offers to which the psalmist

turns. From the end of verse 2 to the end of verse 4, he presents a series of petitions to God, the source of his strength and security.

From his position of isolation from the end of the earth, he calls to God to bring him to a place of safety and refuge. This place is found with God and in his presence. The psalmist characterises it as like a high rock, a steadfast shelter against the greatest flood or the strongest storm.

God is like a stronghold or a fortress, in whom he can be protected against the most determined of his adversaries. Such metaphors, the high rock and the strong tower, illustrate the character of God's dwelling relative to the hostile forces without. In the dwelling of God, the enemies of the psalmist can batter and bombard with all of their fury, yet the psalmist himself can know peace and protection from all of their devices.

The other metaphors, the tent and the shelter of God's wings, emphasise more the internal reality of the dwelling of God. In the tent of God and under the shelter of his wings, the psalmist can enjoy not just God's protection, but also his comforting presence. The house of God is a place of fellowship and intimacy with God.

From his position at the end of the earth, the psalmist seems to experience a sudden dawning of confidence and assurance. He reflects upon the goodness of God that he has already experienced. These past and continuing blessings put all of his current difficulties and struggles into a proper perspective.

They assure him that God has heard the vows that he has made to worship him upon his deliverance. The inheritance or the heritage that God has given might refer to the blessing of the land given to his people, or more broadly to the blessing of being in covenant relationship with the Most High God. The Christian singing this psalm might consider the way that, no matter what our trials may be, we too can enjoy that fundamental heritage of those who fear God's name.

God has marked us out as his own, numbered us among his people, and assured us of the inheritance of his eternal glory. Any momentary misfortune that might befall us is placed into proper perspective by this more foundational and enduring blessedness. Verses 6-7 are perhaps a surprising couple of verses to find in a psalm attributed to David.

Some scholars have suggested that these verses might be a later addition. This is not the only time in psalms attributed to David that we see a shift to a third person statement about, or petition for the king, in the middle of a psalm that is predominantly in the first person. We see something similar in Psalm 28 verse 8. The Lord is the strength of his people, he is the saving refuge of his anointed.

In Psalm 63 verse 11, But the king shall rejoice in God, all who swear by him shall exult,

for the mouths of liars will be stopped. And in Psalm 84 verse 9, Behold our shield, O God, look on the face of your anointed. There are other possible ways to take such statements.

James Mayes writes, Psalm 84 is a corporate hymn. In it, the congregation prays for the Messiah king, because he is their shield, and their well-being is identified with his. Perhaps here and in the other cases, the king is mentioned for the same reason.

Or it is possible that these psalms were composed for royal recitation, with the king referring to himself in the third person. In either case, all these instances witness to the importance of the Davidic king as one in and through whom God bestowed protection and blessing on the community, and individuals in it. Many Jewish and Christian readers of the psalm have also seen in these words a possible reference to the Messiah, whose throne will endure for all generations.

It is in him that the hopes of David will find their full and final realisation. One of the things that these verses highlight is that the king is not merely an individual, even a paradigmatic one. He is a person in whom the destiny and the interests of the people of God is concentrated.

The UK national anthem opens with the words, God save our gracious Queen, long live our noble Queen, God save the Queen. While these words are petitioning God's blessing upon a specific person, in that petition, the well-being of the entire nation is being sought. As the cause of the Queen prospers, so her people should prosper.

In the psalms, the same thing needs to be borne in mind. The Psalms of David and Distress are psalms that connote a corporate, collective distress of the entire people of David. We should consequently be wary of overly individualising them.

The I of the psalms is in many instances primarily the I of the representative of the whole people, and the I of the whole people. According to the Davidic covenant, the whole people could be blessed or judged on account of the Davidic king. They participate in his life.

In 2 Samuel 7 verses 12-16, we see words that the petition in this psalm is almost certainly purposefully echoing in part. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever.

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you.

And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me. Your throne

shall be established for ever. On account of the union between the people and the king, the psalms of the king could simultaneously carry both an individual and a corporate sense.

The king composed psalms about his distress and invited the entire nation to join him in singing them, not as an expression of his self-absorption, but as an expression of the people's participation in, and there being, the extension of, his life. Peter Lighthouse notes an especially striking instance of this in 2 Chronicles 7.6. The priests stood at their posts, the Levites also, with the instruments for music to the Lord that King David had made for giving thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures for ever. Whenever David offered praises by their ministry, opposite them the priests sounded trumpets, and all Israel stood.

King David is praising the Lord through the Levitical musicians, but David has by that point been dead for about two decades. The king is the chief worshipper, who is the leading member of the assembly, who worships God at and as their head. The people as they worship, are worshipping in the name of the king, and as the people of the king.

This relationship between the king and his people is even more profoundly true of Christ and his people. Lighthouse writes, Hebrews 2 verse 12 As Christians, we can locate our sufferings in the suffering of our Messiah, and find his triumph in the midst of our distress. The psalmist vowed to praise God when delivered from his distress, and calls upon God to permit him to do this, that, through God's gracious deliverance, he might sing God's praises day by day, leading the assembly in glorifying God.

Psalm 62 Psalm 62 Psalm 62 Psalm 62 is a testimony to the congregation. It begins with the experience of the psalmist, and speaks of his trust in adversity, addressing the lessons drawn from his experience to the people of the congregation. It is attributed to David.

The psalmist, even in a position of trial, is able confidently to look to God for his salvation. God alone is the one who will assure him of deliverance. God is the psalmist's rock, salvation, and fortress.

Consequently, nothing can deeply unsettle him. The psalmist, in verses 3-4, turns from addressing God to speaking to his threatening adversaries, who are persistent in their assaults. He asks them how long they intend to continue in their schemes, before describing them in third person in verse 4. The psalmist's enemies are duplicitous.

They flatter, they feign to be his friends, yet within they are cursing him and seeking his downfall. Verses 5-6 return to the verses with which the psalm began. As we often see in such repetitions in the psalms, what is seemingly a straightforward repetition, invites the hearer to observe a significant shift that has occurred.

The words may be much the same on the surface, but they can resonate very differently, given their different point in the progression of the psalm and minor alterations. Beth Tanner observes of these particular verses. Verses 5 and 6 are almost identical to verses 1-2, but with three significant differences.

First, the verb form has changed to an imperative, and this change alters the tenor of the verse from testimony to exclamation. Second, the word in the second line changes from salvation to hope. And finally, the word severely, in verse 2, is omitted in verse 6. Beyond Tanner's observations, we could further note that verse 7 serves as a sort of expansion of the declaration, accentuating its force.

The shift from the statement of verse 1, for God alone my soul waits in silence, to the exhortation the psalmist addresses to himself in verse 5, for God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, has the effect of intensifying the psalmist's commitment to that posture of faithful confidence. The change from the statement that he will not be greatly shaken, to the more categorical statement that he will not be shaken, is an important one too. In verse 8, the psalmist's exhortation to, and confident statement concerning himself, is addressed as a more general exhortation to the people as a whole.

God has been a refuge for the psalmist, so he confidently declares to the assembly that God can be a refuge for the entire people. God has been a refuge to me, so God will be a refuge for us. In verses that thematically parallel verses 3 and 4, the psalmist describes the character of human beings.

Some versions present these verses as differentiating between persons of different classes, to show that human status counts for very little according to God's measures. In other versions, there is a more general reference being made to human beings in both cases. When mortals are so light, as light as the near weightless breath that animates them, they are clearly poor sources of strength and security.

Beyond trusting in human status and strength, it is folly to trust in extortion and robbery, in those powers that enable people to prey upon others. Nor are riches to be trusted. They can easily fail or be taken.

The bold expression of trust in God, then, is matched with a declaration of the folly of trusting in man. Verses 11-12, with which the psalm concludes, sum up the message. God is the one who has power and steadfast love.

This both exposes the emptiness of man's supposed power, and underlines the fact that God is the one to whom we must turn for salvation. Not only does he have the power to aid us, he has the steadfast love that expresses his willingness to do so. And it is for this reason that the righteous can turn to God for aid with great confidence.

A question to consider. Looking more closely at it, can you see any further patterns or

progressions within this psalm? Acts chapter 20, verses 1-16 After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions, and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece.

There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews, as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. Sophrata the Beryan, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him, and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus. These went on ahead, and were waiting for us at Troas.

But we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days. On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer, and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead.

But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him. And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.

But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board, and went to Mytilene, and sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios. The next day we touched at Samos, and the day after that we went to Miletus, for Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

After the riot in Ephesus, Paul now leaves for Macedonia at the beginning of chapter 20. He is now working his way back to Jerusalem, where his third missionary journey will be completed. Going through Macedonia, he goes through Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, before moving down towards Corinth.

He is retracing the steps of his second missionary journey. While he is doing this, he is encouraging and building up the churches along the way, bringing news from one place to another, bringing ministers from one place to another, and collecting gifts to bring back to Jerusalem. Alongside this, he is also writing some letters.

He most likely writes 2 Corinthians at the time in Macedonia, as we might see in 2 Corinthians 9, verses 1-3. Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry

for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that a chair has been ready since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers, so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be.

Paul on this journey is accompanied by several companions, including Luke himself, the wee returns at Philippi. These companions represent various churches in the various regions, many of whom seem to intend to return with Paul to Jerusalem. Why such a large company for a missionary journey that is seemingly completed? It seems most likely that they are a delegation of many of the churches in various parts of the empire, bringing their respective gifts back to Jerusalem with Paul, representing their congregations in so doing.

This is a sort of harvest of the nations, which Paul is eager to bring to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, the feast of the harvest. This would bring the narrative full circle, back to the initial gift of the spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem at the beginning of the book. Now there is a new gift being given at Pentecost.

Now the spirit is bringing in a much greater harvest, and perhaps Paul is intending to perform a sort of symbolic presentation of the harvest of the Gentile mission field with these men. The fact that there are seven named persons might even relate to the seven lambs that are offered as part of the Pentecost sacrifices. They have been gathered together around the time of the feast of first fruits, and they will be presented in Jerusalem at Pentecost with their gifts for Paul.

This will be an expression of the unity of the church in Christ. Like Jesus, his master, the apostle Paul is also travelling towards Jerusalem and his capture there, surrounded by a company of disciples. Paul will also write the epistle to the Romans shortly after this, as we can see from Romans chapter 15 verses 25 to 26.

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. We can easily fall into the trap of reading Paul's letters as abstract theological treatises. We can forget that they were delivered to particular bodies of people, in particular places, in particular times.

This is really a critical juncture in Paul's ministry. He is trying to bring back this large group of Gentiles that will represent the harvest of the Gentiles, and he is writing to churches preparing them on the way. He is also writing to prepare ahead of time for his fourth missionary journey, which he hopes will take him to Rome.

We can easily read Paul's letters as books abstracted from time, as if Paul was writing about theology in a vacuum. But reading Paul's letters against the backdrop of the book of Acts, we can see that Paul was a traveller, he was a missionary, he was a man of

action, and his letters are actions too. His letters would often be designed to prepare the way for him in his mission, or perhaps on occasions as an alternative to a visit where he lacked the time or the opportunity.

This, of course, is especially the case for the prison letters. In Troas, around the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, he gathers with the disciples there for a meeting on the first day of the week. He is trying to instruct them more deeply in the truth, and it seems that he talks for a very long period of time.

He talks for hours, until midnight, and then beyond that, to the daybreak. It is of very great importance to him that he grounds them as firmly as he can in the truth during the time that he has. In some respects, we might see some Passover themes here.

There is a sort of Last Supper in an upper room. There is death at midnight, just as the angel of death came at midnight upon Egypt. Paul is also preparing to leave for a long journey that will lead him up to the time of Pentecost.

The reference to the Christians meeting on the first day of the week here raises the question of whether this had become more common practice by this time. 1 Corinthians 16, verse 2 also mentions the importance of the first day of the week. Whether or not this was just a pragmatic shift at this point, later on it would become clear that the movement from the last day of the week as the day of worship to the first day of the week was a significant theological movement.

The celebration of the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week commemorated the conclusion of the creation. It also commemorated the formation of the covenant at Sinai. A shift to worship on the first day of the week seems fitting when the event that is being recalled is a new creation, established on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, and also the establishment of a new covenant, established in Christ's resurrection too.

Paul speaks at length in a room where many are gathered together, and one of the young men, Eutychus, falls asleep. In this room where they gathered, there are many lamps. Many commentators suggest that the lamps might have something to do with Eutychus falling asleep.

The lamps affect the air quality. But Eutychus is sitting in an open window, so he is probably not experiencing the worst of the air quality, and the fact that Paul is speaking on and on around midnight is likely reason enough to explain why he fell asleep. The emphasis upon the many lights does draw a distinction between a realm of great light and a realm of darkness.

It's midnight and it's pitch black outside, whereas inside where the disciples are gathered, there is great light. Lamps in the upper story of a house might also make us

think of lights in the heavens, the third story of the created cosmos. Beyond this, we could think about the connection between lights and Pentecost.

At Pentecost, the disciples were lit like lamps, with tongues of flame descending upon their heads. Eutychus falls down from the window, and he is taken up dead. This is the fourth of four stories in scripture that involve the raising of a dead body in an upper room.

The other examples are found in the books of the kings, and then earlier on in the book of Acts. Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. Elisha raises the son of the Shunamite woman in 2 Kings 4. And Peter raises Dorcas in Acts 9, verses 36-42.

In each of these cases, it is associated with an upper room. Paul's bending over Eutychus as part of the means by which he is raised up might remind us of the way that Elijah and Elisha lie upon the bodies of the children that they raise up. The contrast between light in the room and darkness outside, death outside and the raising to life inside, might help us to see some symbolic import in this story.

Feeling keenly the death and the darkness that surrounds them, it would be comforting and encouraging to the church at Troas to know that God is more powerful than all of the death and the darkness that might assail them. This section concludes with a lengthy itinerary of their journey back, past Ephesus. The detailed character of this itinerary is perhaps understandable because Luke is with them.

This is a first person account that he is giving at this point. Beyond that fact, however, the itinerary might remind us of certain stories that we find in the Old Testament, as Abraham goes throughout the land, or maybe as the people conquer the land going from one place to another. The story of Paul's missionary journeys is in many ways achieving something similar.

A question to consider. This passage ends with an expression of Paul's intention to get back to Jerusalem before the day of Pentecost. It's important to him to be there at that point, and as we have seen, there may be some symbolic connection between what he's doing in bringing the gift from the Gentiles and the Gentiles themselves at the time of the Feast of Harvest.

Nevertheless, the reference to a Jewish feast, and Paul's eagerness to get back in time to celebrate it, might surprise some hearers. Yet this is by no means the only occasion where we see something like this. Where else in the Book of Acts can we see references to Jewish feasts, and what significance is given to them at these different junctures?