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The rejection of Saul. Grace and the fruit of thanksgiving.

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

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Transcript

1 Samuel 15. And Samuel said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel. Now therefore listen to the words of the Lord.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek, and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.

So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telim, two hundred thousand men on foot and ten thousand men of Judah. And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said to the Kenites, Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them.

For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt. So

the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havala as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.

And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel, I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments. And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning.

And it was told Samuel, Saul came to Carmel, and behold he set up a monument for himself, and turned and passed on, and went down to Gilgal. And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, Blessed be you to the Lord, I have performed the commandment of the Lord. And Samuel said, What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen that I hear? Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.

Then Samuel said to Saul, Stop, I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night. And he said to him, Speak. And Samuel said, Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel.

And the Lord sent you on a mission and said, Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed. Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord? And Saul said to Samuel, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me.

I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal. And Samuel said, Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king. Saul said to Samuel, I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.

Now therefore please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the Lord.

And Samuel said to Saul, I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel. As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore.

And Samuel said to him, The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and given it to a neighbour of yours who is better than you. And also the glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man that he should have regret. Then he said, I have sinned, yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God.

So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the Lord. Then Samuel said, Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites. And Agag came to him cheerfully.

Agag said, Surely the bitterness of death is past. And Samuel said, As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women. And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death. But Samuel grieved over Saul, and the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Saul has already failed as king in a number of ways. In chapter 14 his unbelief and ineffectiveness was shown up by the faithfulness of his son Jonathan. And in chapter 15 the Lord finally rejects him as king.

Saul is instructed here to carry out heroic warfare against Amalek, to block them out from under heaven. He has to follow the pattern of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 16-18. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes.

But you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods. And so you sin against the Lord your God. People under the ban must be utterly destroyed.

In the case of Amalek there was more history involved. In Exodus chapter 17 Amalek fought against Israel when they came out of Egypt, when they were at their very weakest. They were defeated by Joshua as Moses held up his hands supported by Aaron and Hur.

Exodus chapter 17 verses 13-16 read, And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner,

saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord.

The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. This is referred to also in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17-19. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God has given you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven, you shall not forget. This describes the events of Exodus chapter 17 and speaks of a time when they have rest in the land that they will have to settle this particular issue, and that time has arrived. The law concerning Amalek in Deuteronomy chapter 25 is given in the context of the law of the Leveret.

There is a contrast between the man who comes to the aid of his brother when he is at his weakest, when he has died and his name is about to be lost, and he comes so that his name will not be blotted out, and then a people who sought to blot out the name of their brother when he was at his weakest. Amalek is Israel's brother of a kind. Amalek is a descendant of Esau, a descendant of Esau who did not seem to surrender his opposition to Jacob.

Amalek's ancestry is given to us in Genesis chapter 36 verse 12. Before attacking the Amalekites, Saul instructs the Kenites to leave. The Kenites were associated with Midian and with Jethro, and there's a contrast between the Amalekites and the Kenites.

One of these peoples, the Amalekites, are being remembered for judgment for their actions at the time of the Exodus, and the other people, the Kenites, are being remembered for kindness for their actions at the same time. The Amalekites are met in chapter 17 of Exodus, the Kenites in chapter 18. The Amalekites are to the southwest of the land of Israel, and Saul successfully pursues them to the east of Egypt.

However, he does not do what the Lord has instructed. Saul and the people spare the best of the flocks and the animals and the goods for themselves. They don't destroy them.

Saul also saves King Agag. Why save King Agag? Maybe because he thinks that kings should be exempt from these sorts of requirements. King Agag as a fellow king should not come under the ban.

Kings are above the law, not under it. This is not pleasing to the Lord, and the Lord rejects Saul on account of his actions. The word of the Lord comes to Samuel and declares his rejection of Saul from the kingship.

Samuel's response is anger. He cries to the Lord all night. It is important to recognise

that this does not please Samuel.

Samuel is not Saul's opponent, as many scholars have presented him to be. He is like Saul's adoptive father. He confronts Saul on a number of occasions and rebukes him harshly.

But he does so because he cares about Saul. He wants Saul to succeed. Saul is like a son to Samuel, and Samuel does not want to see him fail and be rejected.

Samuel goes and sees Saul. When Samuel confronts Saul, Saul lies. He declares that he has performed the commandment of the Lord, and when challenged about the voice of the sheep and the lowing of the oxen, he claims that they are going to be given as peace offerings at Gilgal.

The suggestion earlier on is that they kept the best for themselves. And here it says it's to sacrifice to the Lord Samuel's God. This might be the same thing, it might be referring to peace offerings at Gilgal.

But while it is presented as a pious act when it's described to Samuel, earlier on we see it's for the people's own purposes. They devote to destruction those things that are worthless and despised, while saving those things that look good. Their decision to keep the best as peace offerings may be because they can eat the peace offerings themselves.

It's not a whole burnt offering, it's not completely dedicated to destruction. What they're doing, in essence, is taking what belongs to the Lord. And although there's a pious reason given, there is no pious motive involved.

Saul is like Achan who took forbidden spoil and hid it. He is also like Haphnah and Phinehas who took parts of the sacrifice that belonged to the Lord and parts that belonged to the people for themselves. We might also think of the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5. Saul began his prophetic ministry with judgment against Eli's house, and now he will have to declare judgment against Saul's house.

Saul has taken the forbidden fruit. When confronted his response is to blame the people, much as Aaron blamed the people in Exodus chapter 32 and Adam blamed his wife in Genesis chapter 3. Like Moses and Joshua descending down the mountain, Samuel inquires about a commotion that gives away the rebellion that has occurred. This is all another fall event.

And much as Exodus chapter 32 involved the breaking of the tablets, this will involve the tearing of the kingdom from Saul's hand. Samuel rebukes Saul, has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. This is an essential truth about worship.

Worship needs to be confirmed in practice. Worship that proceeds from disobedience is no worship at all. Praising God with your lips when your heart is far from him is an abomination to the Lord.

Mercy is greater than sacrifice. Saul has rejected the kingship of the Lord, and so his kingship will be rejected. Samuel compares this rebellion with witchcraft.

Witchcraft involves turning to Satan, much as Eve heeded the voice of the serpent in the garden. Saul will end up turning to a witch in chapter 28. Saul admits his sin, but he does not repent.

Again he blames the people. He says that he feared them and obeyed their voice, much the same as Aaron blamed the people in Exodus chapter 32. He is more concerned that Samuel is the prophetic father of the nation, show a united face with him, and not undermine his authority.

When Samuel turns from him, Saul seizes the skirt of Samuel's robe and it tears. And the torn robe represents the torn kingdom. We see a similar thing in 1 Kings chapter 11 verses 29-31.

And at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him on the road. Now Ahijah had dressed himself in a new garment, and the two of them were alone in the open country. Then Ahijah laid hold of the new garment that was on him, and tore it into twelve pieces.

And he said to Jeroboam, Take for yourself ten pieces, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel. Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon, and will give you ten tribes. Perhaps one of the surprising things here is the reference to the fact that the Lord does not have regret in verse 29, when in verse 11 we're told that the Lord does have regret, and again in verse 35.

Seeing these seemingly contradictory statements so close to each other should alert us to the fact that we are dealing with an apparent contradiction, not an actual contradiction. If there were an actual contradiction, they would not be in such close proximity. Both statements must be taken as true, but they must be taken as true in particular senses.

The challenge for us is to recognise how both of these things can be true after a particular sense. One of the tasks of theology is to reconcile statements like these. So on the one hand we recognise that statements about God, such as his regret concerning Saul, are true statements.

They tell us something that is actually the case about God. On the other hand, it can't be the case that the Lord regrets the choice of Saul in the same way as a human being can regret a past action. The Lord does not change his mind.

God's omniscience also means that he can't make a decision or choice and then later regret the outcome that he had not foreseen. God is not taken by surprise. God is not affected by moods and whims and fancies.

He is not fickle and changeable as a human being may be. Such statements then invite us to reflect, to think deeper, to think about the ways in which things can be held together even when they seem to be pulling apart. We will often find scripture inviting us into the discovery of insight through the presentation of problems on the surface of the text.

Samuel ends up giving public respect to Saul. He's not going to overturn the monarchy and its authority. The direct overturning of authority is a very dangerous thing.

However, there will be a replacement chosen for Saul and Saul will lose his dynasty. Samuel slays Agag before the Lord and judges him for his cruelty and the cruelty of his nation. Saul and Samuel then go their separate ways, divided from each other and never seeing each other again until the end of Samuel's life.

A question to consider. The story of the Book of Esther has many allusions to the story of Saul and the Amalekites. It continues and completes that story in certain respects.

Can you discover many of these allusions? How do Mordecai and Esther succeed where Saul failed? The point is this. Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, he has distributed freely he has given to the poor, his righteousness endures forever. He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift. 2 Corinthians chapter 9 continues Paul's discussion of the gift to the saints in Jerusalem from the previous chapter. Paul makes a well calculated rhetorical appeal to the Corinthians here.

He is quite invested in their response because he has boasted about them to the

Macedonians, much as he boasted about the Macedonians to them in the previous chapter. The Macedonians' positive response he described in the previous chapter was spurred in part by the Corinthians' own initial zeal for the collection. The Macedonians had gotten the impression that the Corinthians had surpassed them in their zeal in this matter, but now the Macedonians, who had caught the zeal for the collection from Paul's report about the Corinthians, might find out that the Corinthians had grown sluggish.

Paul is concerned that if some Macedonians accompany him when he visits the Corinthians and finds their collection incomplete, both he and the Corinthians would lose face. For this reason Paul has sent on an advance party to prepare the Corinthians for his visit, so that they have the collection that they have promised ready in time. Paul is concerned that it be a willing gift, not a sort of tax.

It should be an overflow of grace and love. The willingness of the gift is extremely important and determines its nature and the blessing associated with it. Paul isn't commanding the Corinthians to give.

To command them to give willingly would be to undermine the character that their gift must have. The gift should be an expression of their hearts and a communication of their love and gratitude. However, he is very strongly exhorting them to do so.

An appropriate gift will be self-determined, without reluctance, without external compulsion, and cheerful. There is something about the ideal character of Christian obedience revealed here. Such loving action from the heart is the character of true gift and service.

And this is all integral to the logic of grace. God causes his grace to abound to us to the end of our fruitfulness in good works. These good works are works of gratitude, works that flow from the heart.

God makes all grace abound to us so that we may have all sufficiency in all things at all times. The repeated alls underline the fullness and the comprehensive character of the grace of God, as do the terms abound and sufficiency and these sorts of expressions of completeness. God addresses all of our needs in every situation and this is all so that we might abound in every good work.

The fullness and extensiveness of God's grace is answered by the fullness and extensiveness of our freely given good works. These good works are not ways that we earn God's grace, but are ways that we respond to and live out of God's grace. They are the appropriate gratitude that answers to God's prior gift.

Good works are necessary for the Christian, as they are the very way that we live out of the reality of God's grace and goodness to us. God is scattering his righteousness abroad, providing what the poor need. His righteousness is his covenant keeping justice,

his goodness to his people, and this distribution is what supplies seed to us and the harvest that results.

We become the righteousness of God as we become fellow workers with him in this manner. God provides us with what we need to do the good works that he has prepared for us. Grace produces grace.

God's gift of grace to us is a scattering of seed to sow us, involving us in a cycle of grace ourselves. We must become participants in the spread and the growth of grace ourselves and then we will enjoy the bountiful fruits. Paul argues that the gift of the Corinthians, which arises from the gifts that they themselves have received, will produce a rich and bountiful harvest.

Not only will they be providing for the needs of the Jerusalem Christians, they will also be proving themselves fertile soil for the seed of God's grace, as the seed of his grace in themselves produces a bumper crop of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving and the giving of glory to God is what it is all intended to lead to. As a consequence of the Corinthians generosity in expression of their thanksgiving for what they have received from God through the Jews in the gospel, much thanksgiving will result.

The Jerusalem Christians will glorify God for what he has done through the Corinthians. The hearts of the Jerusalem Christians will be more knit to the Corinthians and they will long for greater fellowship with the Corinthians and intercede for them, recognizing the greatness of God's grace to them. This will all serve the purpose of Paul's ministry of reconciliation, which isn't just about reconciling man to God, but also about reconciling man to man, Jews to Gentiles, slave to free, male to female.

God's grace produces grace in its recipients and expressions of this grace produce the return of that grace to God in joyful thanksgiving. Grace drives the entirety of Christian existence. Once again it is in the context of a supposedly mundane and practical issue, a relief collection for Christians in Jerusalem, that some of Paul's richest theological reflection is found.

In this case a discussion of the way that grace must animate everything about our lives as Christians and how Christian good works are the germination and growth of the seeds of grace within our lives. Recognizing the logic of grace as Paul describes it here, we'll also see that our appropriate expression of grace leaves us richer even as we are giving to others. The more that God's gracious gift to us is expressed in our gracious gifts to others, the more that we come into possession of God's gift.

A question to consider, what light might this passage shed upon the knotty issue of faith and works as they relate to our standing before God? you