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November 13th: Psalms 32 & 36 & Acts 15:1-21

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The blessedness of the forgiven and taking comfort in the character of the Lord. The Jerusalem Council.

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

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Transcript

Psalms 32, a Mascal of David. Psalm 32 is a psalm of thanksgiving and testimony. It recounts the penitence of the worshipper and the restoration of the Lord.

It gives praise to the Lord for what he has done and presents the worshippers example to others as an encouragement for them to humble themselves and to trust in the Lord. Some have imagined this psalm coming from the period after David's confession of his sins concerning Bathsheba and Uriah. It begins with two beatitudes, statements of the blessedness of those who are forgiven.

This is a reflection upon the good fortune of the speaker, upon the greatness of the grace that he has received. These display the characteristic parallelism of Hebrew poetry. They parallel each other, but also have a parallel within themselves.

When we encounter such parallelism, we can often be inclined to skim over it, to regard it as merely stylistic and superfluous repetition of the same thought in some other words. However, closer examination generally reveals that more is going on. The parallelisms tend to develop or to fill out the thought in some way.

And here that is definitely the case. Forgiveness of transgression is filled out in the notion of the covering of sin. The rebel has been pardoned and his crime has been removed, covered over, not in guilty concealment, but through its being revealed and addressed.

The second line develops the thought in a more relational direction. The man who is blessed with such pardon has no charge counted against him by God. He is a person in good standing with his creator.

In Romans 4, verses 6-8, the apostle Paul quotes this verse to substantiate his point about the person whom God justifies apart from works. This is a sinner, undeserving of forgiveness, who purely through divine mercy and grace now enjoys the happiness of right standing with God. The internal parallel deals with the blessedness of the internal state that corresponds with this non-imputation of iniquity.

Such a person has no deceit in his spirit. He can be open with God and open with his neighbour. He doesn't need to cover up his sin because God has covered it up in forgiveness.

David will go on to explore something more of the damage that deceit in the heart of unforgiven persons can do in verses 3-5. The psalmist here describes his personal experience of this. He is giving testimony here.

He is encouraging others to join him in dealing with their sins in the same manner. As long as he was silent about his sin, covering it up, he wasted away inside. Not just spiritually but physically it gnawed away at him.

It robbed him of joy, of sleep and of strength. However, when he confessed his sin, he knew release and forgiveness from the Lord. He could relate to the Lord once more openly.

When he ceased to cover up his iniquity, the Lord could cover his iniquity. He describes his confession in paralleled expressions. I acknowledged my sin.

I did not cover my iniquity. I will confess my transgressions. While addressing the Lord, David expresses his desire that every person committed to the Lord take the same approach as he did and discover the same relief.

People who confess their sins in such a manner will not be overwhelmed even though all troubles might come against them. The Lord will protect all those who flee to him,

providing them with a secure hiding place and joyful assurance of their deliverance. It is unclear who is the speaker and the addressee in verse 8, especially as the you is singular.

It might seem to be the Lord addressing the worshipper. The verse describes a guidance provided with instruction and a guidance provided with oversight. For the person who had languished in unforgiveness, this offers direction and clarity of path that he had formerly lacked.

The psalm concludes with a more general exhortation. The heroes of the psalm should beware of stubbornness and should be receptive and attentive to the word of God addressed to them not needing to be driven or dragged around like an uncompliant animal. The wicked person will find that his way is a miserable one, afflicted with many troubles that he has largely brought upon himself.

However, the one who trusts in and turns to the Lord, uncovering his sin, experiences the Lord's steadfast love as the Lord covers his sin in forgiveness. This experience, the experience of the forgiveness of sins and right standing with God, leads to gladness and praise, in which the psalmist concludes by calling all of those who share this experience to join him. A question to consider.

How might the covering up of our sins lead us to waste away? Psalm 36 To the Choir Master of David the Servant of the Lord Transgression speaks to the wicked, deep in his heart. There is no fear of God before his eyes, for he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated. The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit.

He has ceased to act wisely and do good. He plots trouble while on his bed. He sets himself in a way that is not good.

He does not reject evil. Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens. Your faithfulness to the clouds.

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God. Your judgments are like the great deep. Man and beast you save, O Lord.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God. The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life. In your light do we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart.

Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie fallen. They are thrust down, unable to rise.

Psalm 36 reflects upon the experience of the righteous person who must live in the midst of wicked man, and the comfort to be found in turning to the Lord in such a situation. The psalm begins with a description of the wicked. The meaning of the opening line is not entirely clear.

Many commentators and translations interpret it as a description of the wicked. Rebellious speech is at the very heart of the wicked. Alternatively, John Goldengate suggests that it might mean that the rebellious utterance of the wicked is in the midst of the psalmist's heart.

The words of the wicked have hit close to home for the psalmist, and unsettled him. Alan Ross raises a different possibility. He translates it as follows.

An oracle of the transgression of the wicked is in the midst of my heart. The Lord has given the psalmist a revelation about the character of the wicked, which he is about to declare. The rebellious person lacks all dread of the Lord, all awareness of the seriousness of the Lord's judgment.

Even though they might not deny the Lord's existence, they live as if God did not exist. Such wicked persons act as if God did not see them and their actions. The wicked person flatters himself.

He has internalized the process of telling himself what he wants to hear, even though it is manifestly untrue. He is self-deceived, in particular in the belief that his iniquity is hidden, and won't be revealed. He rationalizes things to himself, dulling his conscience.

But his deceit does not end with himself, it infects his words to others. He causes trouble with his mouth, as his self-rationalizing lies are used upon others. He has abandoned the way of wisdom, and of goodness, which belong together.

Not only does he deceive himself, and corrupt others with his words, he is proactive in evil. He schemes at night in his bed. He commits himself to an evil path, all of these things flowing from his initial internal rationalization of sin, which itself comes from a failure to keep God before his eyes.

In the sharpest of contrasts with the wicked man and his ways, David turns to the character of the Lord in verses 5-9. The juxtaposition that he chooses here is not between the wicked and the righteous, but between the wicked and the Lord in the all-surpassing goodness, faithfulness and righteousness of his character. Derek Kidner writes, Here is a whole world to explore, a broad place to be brought into, unsearchable, heavens and clouds, impregnable, mountains, inexhaustible, the great deep, yet, for all that, welcoming and hospitable.

It is only man's world that is cramping. Human fickleness makes a drooping contrast to this towering covenant love and faithfulness. Human standards, where all is relative, are

a marshland beside the exacting, exhilarating mountains of his righteousness.

Human assessments are shallowness itself in comparison with his judgments. The faithful character of God is the source of his people's delight and security. We take refuge beneath the covering that he extends over us, protecting us through all of the storms of this life.

As worshippers eating at the table of the Lord's house, we enjoy abundance as we feast on his goodness, as if returned to Eden, we drink of the Lord's blessing as of a river of delights. The Lord is the source of both life and light. He is the fountain from which life flows, the living water that endlessly springs up and eternally quenches the thirst of his people, refreshing them forever.

He is the great light that illuminates all lesser lights. The light of his blessing is that which opens our eyes to see everything else. The psalm concludes with a petition to the Lord, a petition that the Lord would continue in his faithfulness and righteousness towards his people, protecting the psalmist from the wicked that he described in the opening verses.

The fall of such wicked persons is certain and complete and indeed is already in the process of happening. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which God's light enables us to see light? Acts 15, verses 1-21 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe and God who knows the heart bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us and he made no distinction between us and them having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear but we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.

And all the assembly fell silent and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking James replied, Brothers, listen to me Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name and with this the words of the prophets agree just as it is written After this I will return and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who are called by my name says the Lord who makes these things known from of old Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood for from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues Acts chapter 15 is at the heart of the book of Acts the Gentile mission is underway Peter has brought the gospel to Cornelius Paul and Barnabas have recently returned from the first missionary journey in Asia Minor Now the question of the character of the new body of the church is an issue to be decided What status should the Gentiles have within the church? Do they need to be circumcised and come under the Jewish purity requirements and take on the covenant sign of circumcision? Most of the Gentile converts to this point had been God-fearers associated with synagogue communities It probably wouldn't have been seen as a big thing for them to be circumcised and become full members of Christian synagogues The Christian movement at this point was largely a Jewish one and it might have seemed natural to most at this point that becoming part of such a movement would require becoming a Jew The question of circumcision would become a much keener question as the gospel went out to Gentiles with a pagan background without any prior association with the Jews The controversy that leads to the Jerusalem council is first provoked by men coming from Judea to Antioch teaching that Gentile converts need to be circumcised in order to be saved This was the cause of great dispute with Paul and Barnabas Paul had already had the Gentile mission especially committed to him and had just returned from his first missionary journey with Barnabas Paul is naturally especially concerned that this question be settled adequately The issues at stake in the Jerusalem council and other related matters are at the very heart of Paul's message in a number of his epistles especially Romans and Galatians The visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem at the end of Acts chapter 11 is the visit that seems to be mentioned in the first part of Galatians chapter 2 It's a private visit it's by revelation, by the prophecy of the coming famine and it's bringing aid to the needy saints in Jerusalem This might help to explain why the leaders in Jerusalem are concerned that Paul take continued interest in the needs of the poor the poor being the Judean Christians that need the support from those outside of the region The conflict in Antioch that provokes this visit to Jerusalem is the conflict with Peter described in Galatians chapter 2 verses 11-21 When I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel I said to Cephas before them all If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews? We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile

sinner. Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not. For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. This, I believe, fits the description of the events in this chapter. The conflict occurs in Antioch. The teachers come from Jerusalem from the churches associated with James. The false teachers here believe that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved, as there had long been uncircumcised God-firs. If we are God-firs, we might wonder what this belief exactly was. My suggestion is that they believed that something had changed with the coming of Christ. God had formerly overlooked the situation of the Gentiles. They had formerly been able to be God-firs, not part of the covenant but relating to God from outside of it. But now, in their understanding, God wanted all people everywhere to repent, to turn to become part of his people and to be circumcised. At stake in such a form of apocalyptic Judaism then would be the question of whether or not. It's a question of what happens in the shift of the old age to the new age in the coming of the new covenant. It's a question of eschatology. Are Gentiles to be saved as Gentiles or do they need to become Jews to become part of this new age of the Messiah. In response to the coming of people of the Circumcision Party to Antioch, Peter acted hypocritically. He acted out of fear of the Circumcision Party rather than out of his true convictions. To have a clearer idea of what is at stake here, it's instructive to consider Paul's arguments in the book of Galatians. There Paul argues that one of the reasons why the Judaizers want circumcision is to make a good showing in the flesh. The Judaizers can present Christianity as a sort of respectable Jewish sect, observant and conformist. They are making good proselytes of all of these Gentile converts, emphasizing the fact that they are converting them to Judaism, not necessarily the fact that they are converting them to Christ. In such a manner, they can avoid persecution. The problem is that the problem, however, as Paul makes clear, is that such an approach carefully masks the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. It downplays the cross for something that is distinctively secondary. Indeed, it latches onto that secondary, an unnecessary thing, precisely in order to soft-pedal the cross, the way in which Christ is out of step with and at odds with the rulers of this present age and the ways in which he fulfills the law. At such points, becoming all things to all men can be a dangerous thing. And the Circumcision Party seem to be concerned for more than just getting the Gentiles circumcised. The Gentiles also need to observe the other requirements of the Mosaic Covenant in their minds. There are Jews who are members of the Pharisees who are Christians. These groups are not mutually exclusive as we might commonly think. Some of the early Christians were both Pharisees and Christians. And while there were clear

tensions between these things one did not necessarily rule out the other Elsewhere, Paul will speak of himself as a Pharisee although it is clear that he thinks of that identity very differently after his conversion The Apostles and the Elders assemble to consider the matter and they have an extensive debate Peter stands up to speak about the Gospel going to Cornelius through him The Council needs to reckon with the way that God has welcomed the Gentiles without making a distinction between them and the Jews One of the more surprising things here is the way that Peter describes the law as a yoke to be put on the neck of disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear It's not just a statement about the law at this present juncture in history It's a more general statement about the law that applies to their fathers also Why would Peter seemingly present the law so negatively? It seems that he regarded the law as an incredibly onerous thing and when we think about it that's not surprising It involves all these sacrifices pilgrimages these different forms of cleanness that need to be maintained To be truly and fully observant was incredibly difficult and costly In many respects it would be a very frustrating way to live one that would constantly remind you of your sinfulness and your fleshly nature and this frustrating character seems to be more intrinsic to the character of law keeping If God had truly cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith why would they need to go through all of this rigmarole just to keep some Jews happy? God had clearly accepted them as Gentiles so why would they need to become Jews in order to be accepted? The law is not necessary for such converts The law is being insisted upon purely out of fear of the Jews rather than out of any true conviction It is the grace of the Lord Jesus that gives salvation the cross of Christ rather than the law The contrast between the law and Christ is also present in Paul's message in Pisidian Antioch at the end of chapter 13 verses 38-39 Let it be known to you therefore brothers that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses This is Peter's last appearance in the book of Acts James, from whose orbit the teachers who insisted on the circumcision of the Gentiles had come makes the decisive statement and tis against those teachers Peter, here called Simeon by James has given personal testimony of the gospel going to the Gentiles Paul and Barnabas have given further confirming witness Now James references Scripture establishing the point more decisively He quotes Amos chapter 9 verses 11-12 In that day I will raise up the booth of David that has fallen and repair its breaches and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name declares the Lord who does this The booth of David likely has in mind the dynasty and the house of David. Jesus is the son of David and the church is being set up as a new Davidic house It might also be a reference not to the tabernacle but to the tent that David set up for the Ark of the Covenant.

This was not the place of regular sacrifice but it was a place of song and of prayer The Ark of the Covenant had also been associated with Gentiles like Obed-Edom the Gittite foreigners dwelling in the land of Israel Jesus of Nazareth, the new Messianic King, is

forming a new house of prayer for all nations in which Jews and Gentiles are brought together in song and praise around the presence of the Lord. In verse 18 there is a likely reference to Isaiah chapter 45 verse 21. The inclusion of the Gentiles then was always part of God's purpose. God had declared this beforehand. While this might have taken them by surprise, God had foretold this beforehand, and when they look back in the Scripture they find confirming evidence. They lay four requirements upon the Gentiles: They must abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things that have been strangled, and from blood. These issues also come up in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, and they seem to have different rationales. His condemnation of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians is far more categorical in chapters 5-7. However, idol meat is treated very differently by Paul in his argument. The arguments on that front seem to involve giving up rights for the sake of others.

The explanation that James gives here for the judgment seems to be driven in part by sensitivity to the Jews. As there are faithful, observant Jews in every city, it is important not to cause needless scandal or offence. So it is important that Gentiles act in a way that, without adopting all the practices of the Torah, they act in a way that is sensitive and mindful of the scruples of their Jewish neighbours. This is one of the ways that they would express their love for each other in the body of Christ. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which we might be in danger of downplaying, distorting or disguising key elements of the Christian message in order to blend in with our neighbours and avoid persecution?