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June 20th: Judges 3 & Galatians 5

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Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar. Live in the liberty for which Christ set you free!

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

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Transcript

Judges 3 for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. So the people of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and their daughters they took to themselves for wives, and their own daughters they gave to their sons, and they served their gods. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

They forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and the Ashtoreth. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of Cushan Rishithaim, king of Mesopotamia. And the people of Israel served Cushan Rishithaim eight years.

But when the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The

spirit of the Lord was upon him, and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord gave Cushan Rishithaim, king of Mesopotamia, into his hand, and his hand prevailed over Cushan Rishithaim.

So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died. And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

And the Lord strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of Palms.

And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years. Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud, the son of Gerar, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. The people of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.

And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his clothes. And he presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

And when Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent away the people who carried the tribute. But he himself turned back at the idols near Gilgal and said, I have a secret message for you O king. And he commanded, Silence! And all his attendants went out from his presence.

And Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool-roofed chamber. And Ehud said, I have a message from God for you. And he arose from his seat.

And Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into his belly. And the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not pull the sword out of his belly, and the dung came out. Then Ehud went out into the porch, and closed the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked them.

When he had gone the servants came. And when they saw that the doors of the roof chamber were locked, they thought, surely he is relieving himself in the closet of the cool chamber. And they waited till they were embarrassed.

But when he still did not open the doors of the roof chamber, they took the key and opened them. And there lay their lord dead on the floor. Ehud escaped while they delayed, and he passed beyond the idols, and escaped to Syrah.

When he arrived he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim. Then the people of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he was their leader. And he said to them, Follow after me, for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.

So they went down after him, and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and did not allow anyone to pass over. And they killed at that time about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men. Not a man escaped.

So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel, and the land had rest for eighty years. After him was Shamgar the son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines with an ox-goat, and he also saved Israel. Judges chapter 3 begins with a list of the nations that were left to trouble Israelites in the land.

We are told that the reason for leaving these nations was so that the Israelites might learn war. Israel needed to recognise the existence of a fundamental conflict. Preserving a seed of the woman required the maintenance of enmity between them and the seed of the serpent, and war was a means of achieving this.

Had Israel enjoyed peace with the people around them, they might have been even more tempted to assimilate to them. Learning war in this context also meant learning dependence upon the Lord. When you're at peace and at ease and enjoying bounty, it's very easy to lose sense of your need for God.

God can use crisis and death as means to keep a forgetful humanity looking to him. A people that forgets war typically also forgets the cost of things and the virtues required to defend them. A people that have not experienced war can easily become decadent.

When you must put your life on the line for your country, for instance, you need to consider yourself in a different way, considering yourself as part of a story that exceeds your own lifespan, considering the legacy of those who have gone before you that you are guarding and the generations to come for whom you want to protect that legacy. In the absence of war, it is easy to forget those who have gone before and those who come after and to become decadent. The virtues manifested and forged in the crucible of warfare are certainly not the only virtues, and there are some virtues that are best developed in times of peace.

The great exemplars of wisdom in Scripture, for instance, people like Joseph, Solomon and Daniel, were not warriors. Wisdom may most thrive in times and places of peace. However, the main leaders of the people of God in Scripture tended to be men who were acquainted with war and characterised by courage and zeal.

Such men were better aware of the life and death stakes. The remaining nations would serve the purpose then of testing Israel to see whether they would obey the Lord and trust in Him. The temptation was between abandoning the commandment of the Lord for the seemingly strategic approaches of intermarriage, making covenants with the people around them and religious syncretism.

Obedying the commandment of the Lord was an option that did not allow Israel to hedge

their bets. They had to depend upon the Lord's power, provision and promise, trusting Him to deliver them and living in dependence upon Him. We should remember that this dependence also included the modes of war that were open to them.

Israel was forbidden to build a war machine of chariots and horses in Deuteronomy 17, verse 16. People don't usually like to be in such a position of dependence upon God, and Israel was no exception to this. They ended up intermarrying with the Canaanites and serving their gods for this reason.

The judges that the Lord raised up were civil leaders who had settled disputes but they also functioned as deliverers and avengers. They were not hereditary leaders but they seemed to hold their position for their entire lives. We shouldn't think of the judges as if they all came one after another.

The judges were primarily regional figures operating in specific parts of the land rather than the whole. After the death of Joshua all Israel went to their various parts of the inheritance and Israel's life took on a more tribal, local character. A number of the judges were probably acting at the same time in different regions of the land.

The first judge that we hear about is Othniel. Othniel is either the son of Kenaz and Caleb's younger brother or Caleb's nephew the son of his younger brother. Othniel has already been mentioned back in Judges chapter 1 where he married Caleb's daughter Aksa.

This might make more sense if Othniel was Caleb's nephew and it seems to me that 1st Chronicles chapter 4 verses 13-15 gives weight to that particular reading. Othniel continues the legacy of Caleb as a brave Judahite leader. He had won the hand of Caleb's daughter by defeating Kiriath-sepha and now the Lord uses him again.

Othniel is filled with the spirit of the Lord for the purpose of delivering the Israelites from a Mesopotamian king. Maybe we should remember Abram's victory over the kings in chapter 14 of Genesis again from Mesopotamia. The Israelites had served for 8 years under Cushan Rishithayim and the land enjoys 40 years of rest after the deliverance brought about through Othniel.

That's 5 times as many years as they had been troubled. Eglon, the king of the Moabites, comes next. He is joined by the Ammonites and the Amalekites against the Israelites.

The Moabites and the Ammonites were the descendants of Lot. They lived to the east of Israel. Special restrictions had been placed upon their becoming part of the nation back in Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 3-4.

Amalek was the sworn foe who had sought to destroy Israel at its greatest point of weakness. This is mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17-19. They capture Jericho, the city of palms.

Jericho is presumably a site of habitation at this point, although it hasn't been rebuilt as a fortified city after its destruction by Jericho. Israel's subjection to Eglon continues for 18 years. They have to pay tribute to him and Ehud is appointed to bring it.

Ehud is described as a Benjaminite. He is bound in his right hand, which means he is apparently left handed. There is an irony here because Benjamin means son of the right hand.

Later in Judges chapter 20 verse 16 we meet 700 more Benjaminite southpaws. There are a lot of odd weapons in the book of Judges, so Benjaminites who fight with their left hands fit right in. Ehud is a cunning assassin.

Because he's a left handed man he can hide a dagger in a place where people would not expect it. His outwitting of Eglon and his attendance is also given a lot of narrative attention because it has symbolic purpose. He claims that he has a secret word for the king which might play upon the word for sting.

He literally brings a secret sting. Eglon's gross obesity is also an important element of the narrative. He is described as a gluttonous devourer who has grown large and is eating up of the inheritance of the people of God.

His name reminds us of a calf who has been fattened in preparation for slaughter. They are giving him their tribute, presumably of grain. And the manner of his death, which foregrounds the dagger's entry into his stomach and the disgorging of his stomach's contents, is a sort of poetic justice.

He has been devouring the people of God and now what he has consumed is brought out in the most disgusting manner. Likewise Ehud is able to escape because the servants of Eglon think that their devouring monarch is relieving himself. Of course the dung has come out of him but not in the way that they think.

Ehud, after he makes his escape, rallies the people to him in Ephraim. Like Joshua, he is associated with Ephraim. And James Pajon notes the way that his name might recall the unusual word for the authority invested in Joshua in Numbers chapter 27 verse 20.

This gives us two judges with associations with the two great men of the conquest generation. Artheniel with Caleb and Ehud with Joshua. They defeat 10,000 Moabites, much as Judah defeated 10,000 men at Bezac in the first battle recorded in chapter 1. The land then has rest for 80 years, twice as long as the rest that Artheniel gave.

And here 18 years of oppression, 8 plus 10 years, gives way to 80 years of rest, 8 times 10 years. The chapter ends with the strange character of Shamgar, associated with Ehud, who may not be an Israelite at all. He is the son of Anath.

He kills 600 Philistines with an ox goad. While Ehud killed the fattened calf, Shamgar kills

the Philistines with an instrument used for herding oxen. Once again, there's poetic justice here.

It's also an instrument of work, and he wields it as an instrument of war. Israel's weapons were often regular instruments and tools, things that were to hand. They weren't things specially fashioned for war.

As James Jordan observes in this connection, Israel was not a people primarily ordered towards military conquest, but towards working on the land. A question to consider. In what ways might we be in danger of not knowing war? Galatians chapter 5 For freedom Christ has set us free.

Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look, I Paul say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. You have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed.

I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident.

Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the

Kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Galatians chapter 5 begins with a verse summing up the force of the argument of the preceding chapter. Christ has set us free for freedom, and freedom is of little use if you use it to place yourself in slavery.

The Galatian Christians had once been in slavery to idolatry and the physical elements in pagan religion. However, they had been set free by the Spirit of Sonship. They ought not to turn to the Jewish law as an alternative master.

It may not be as cruel as the bondage of paganism, but it remains a sort of bondage. Indeed, now that Christ has come, turning to the Torah is much worse because what was once a guardian, instructing and constraining a sinful people prior to the advent of Christ, actually now functions as a rival to him. For the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and to commit themselves to Torah observance as the way to enjoy standing with God, would be to cast away Christ and all that he represents.

They would have chosen to place their standing with God on a completely different foundation than that which was graciously given to them in Christ. They would have turned to the foundation of observant Judaism, cutting themselves off from Christ. And they would have committed themselves to observe the commandment, which ultimately would place them under the curse.

However, the true heirs wait for the hope of righteousness, they look forward to the vindication of God, and they do so through the Spirit by faith. The reality that gives us standing before God is not the law or Jewish identity. It's the work of the Spirit, and the way that we live out this identity is not by Torah observance, but by faith.

For those in Christ, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, is ultimately irrelevant. Neither of these are the foundation upon which our standing with God rests. Paul doesn't condemn Jews for continuing to practice circumcision.

However, while circumcision was once the mark of a privileged Jewish status before God, in Christ it no longer functions that way. Both Jews and Greeks, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, stand before God on the same ground of God's grace in Christ. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything in Christ, because God's grace is given without respect to either.

The Judaizers have diverted the Galatian churches from the right course that they were

on. Their false teaching threatens to corrupt everything, as a little leaven can leaven an entire lump of dough. And Paul hopes by this point that the Galatians will recognise the danger of the Judaizers and remove them.

It seems that some had suggested that Paul himself still advocated circumcision. This was probably because word of the events of Acts 16, verses 1-3 had travelled around. Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra.

A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

The fact that Paul would circumcise Timothy seems strange to us, given all that he has taught in Galatians to this point. However, his actions can readily be understood as an attempt to avoid placing an unnecessary stumbling block before the people to whom he was ministering. He had described this missionary policy in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23.

Timothy was Paul's son in the Gospel, his close assistant. Like Paul, Timothy was prepared to become like the Jews for the sake of winning them to the Gospel. However, in getting circumcised, he was not seeking to found his standing with God upon the Torah and Torah observance.

Paul's whole point is that circumcision and uncircumcision are ambivalent matters with regard to our standing before God. So if getting circumcised will help you win over a few more to the Gospel, which teaches that standing with God is not on the basis of the Torah, then go right ahead. There's no problem with it, provided that you aren't putting a stumbling block in the way of uncircumcised persons by doing this.

There's no problem whatsoever, because circumcision doesn't matter and uncircumcision doesn't matter. Paul makes clear that, even if he is prepared to have someone like Timothy circumcised, the fact that he is being persecuted on account of his message of the cross is proof that he isn't preaching circumcision. If he were, he would just be a good observant Jew with a few divergent viewpoints and would be of little threat to anyone.

Paul expresses the wish that the Judaizers, so eager to cut off foreskins, would go all the way and completely emasculate themselves. In so doing, they would come under the disqualification from the assembly of Deuteronomy 23.1. No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord. Their situation, then, would better testify to their state relative to the people of God.

Paul reiterates and sharpens the point with which he opened the chapter. The Galatians

were set free for freedom. Christians have been released from bondage to the elements of the world by the Spirit and need to use that freedom in a loving manner.

Indeed, the law, with respect to its moral instruction, a moral instruction designed for a willful and flesh-governed people, is fulfilled in the positive command to love your neighbour as yourself. And it is this love that the Spirit works in us. Should note here that Paul, while declaring the end of the Torah as something that sets Jews apart from Gentiles, is teaching that the Spirit fulfills the Torah in some other respects.

There is a movement from the external law addressed to rebellious flesh to a law written on the hearts that is now lived out as the positive expression of liberty. This is akin to the movement from the restrictions that someone feels when they first learn a musical instrument, where they have to play particular notes and they're given scales to practice and all these sorts of things. And it feels like an external obstacle, an imposition upon the will.

But yet, as that instrument is learned, the freedom of the virtuoso can develop, for whom the logic of the music and the instrument he is playing is a means of freedom itself. It's a way in which he can willingly express his interiority. The debate about the Torah occurs against the backdrop of the fact that Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, a statement with which Paul opened the epistle in chapter 1 verse 4. The whole of the old order, whether lived out under the Torah or far from God in paganism, is lived out in the flesh, under the elementary principles.

It's a realm characterized by sin, by death, by the passions, and by the incapacity to bring about life or righteousness. Christ brings the new age of the spirit, where people can be liberated from the power of the flesh, whether experienced in bondage to the guardian of the Torah or as Gentiles. And the result of this liberty is a new way of life.

There are ways, of course, that this is anticipated within the Old Testament. The law first comes in a primarily prohibitive and prescriptive form, but yet the people are told that they must meditate upon it, that they will learn wisdom from it. And as they do so, a law that was primarily external to them, prohibitive, constraining, and an imposition upon their willfulness, becomes something that is within them.

In the Psalms we see this expression of the law from within. The law is no longer an imposition, but it has become the delight of the heart and is expressed freely from within. In the wisdom literature we see a movement from the law as primarily external commandments to the principles of justice and the insight of those commandments being internalized and now expressed through insight into the way that the world works.

In the prophets we see something even further. For the prophet, the word of God can be eaten, digested, taken into themselves, and then expressed like a burning fire from within. What was once words on tablets of stone outside condemning, something that

stood opposed to the willfulness of the person, has now become part of the person and a free expression.

The prophets, of course, particularly in places like Jeremiah 31-34, promise that the Lord will one day write his law upon the hearts of his people, that that law will no longer be an external commandment condemning them, but it will be one freely obeyed from within. And this is what Paul is talking about here. We should also observe the movement in the form of rhetoric between the old covenant and the new.

Prohibition is the rhetorical form of the law, but the rhetoric of the spirit is one of persuasion, because the law is being written on our hearts by the spirit, and persuasion is a form of rhetoric that addresses people who have a strong apprehension of the good within themselves. Life in the flesh is characterised by rebellion, and by all the impulses of untamed sinful nature. It is driven by our desire to dominate others, for instance.

When people live in such a manner, they will bite and devour each other. However, such people must beware, as those who live by the sword will die by the sword. If they bite and devour others, they are at risk of being consumed themselves.

The order of the flesh is a social, not merely an individual order. It is an order that creates and sustains divisions, whereas the spirit overcomes and traverses them. It is an order of dissipation and degeneracy, where people are enslaved to their lusts and passions.

It is an order of hatred and anger. As those given the spirit, Christians must walk in the spirit, they must starve the flesh. The spirit and the flesh are two powers to which we must relate, but the spirit, of course, is the greater of the two.

If we follow the spirit, we will not just do whatever we want, as the spirit will direct us so that, although we are not under the law, we will be marked by the spirit's fruit. The flesh, the animating principle of the evil age from which we have been delivered, whether we were living under the law as Jews, or apart from the law as Gentiles, has its distinctive and its characteristic works. These are the works that the law constrained, but also in other ways provoked and revealed.

Many of the works that Paul lists here are works that reveal people's lack of self-control. People who remain under the rule of the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom of God. The fruit of the spirit, by contrast, is completely different.

Although we are set free by grace through faith, the liberty that we have received is lived out and demonstrated in a transformed manner of life that comes from the work of the spirit that we were given apart from any status that gave us claim on God. There is a movement from unruly passions to self-control. Once again, these are not just about individuals.

Communities that operate in the spirit will be characterised by these virtues, as we will see in the next chapter. The law has nothing to say to these fruit of the spirit. They are not produced by the law, but neither are they condemned by the law.

Indeed, they live out the life to which the law always testified and pointed and declared, but which it could never achieve or give. The flesh is decisively dealt with in the death of Christ. Christians should die with Christ so that, as Paul said of himself, it is no longer they who live, but Christ who lives in them.

A question to consider. Can you think of any ways in which the rite of circumcision itself, rightly understood, anticipated and pointed towards Paul's message in Galatians?