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October 31st: 2 Chronicles 28 & Acts 8:4-25

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The military failures of Judah under Ahaz. Confrontation with Simon the Sorcerer.

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

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Transcript

2 Chronicles 28. Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel.

He even made metal images for the Baals, and he made offerings in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations, whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, and on the hills and under every green tree. Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him, and took captive a great number of his people, and brought them to Damascus.

He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force. For Pekah the son of Ramaliah killed one hundred and twenty thousand from Judah in one day, all of them men of valor, because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their

fathers. And Zichri a mighty man of Ephraim killed Maaseah the king's son, and Azraqam the commander of the palace, and Elkanah the next in authority to the king.

The men of Israel took captive two hundred thousand of their relatives, women, sons, and daughters. They also took much spoil from them, and brought the spoil to Samaria. But a prophet of the Lord was there, whose name was Oded, and he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria, and said to them, Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand.

But you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven, and now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. Have you not sins of your own against the Lord your God? Now hear me, and send back the captives from your relatives whom you have taken, for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you. Certain chiefs also of the men of Ephraim, Azariah the son of Johanan, Berechiah the son of Meshillamoth, Jehizkiah the son of Shalom, and Amasa the son of Hadlai, stood up against those who were coming from the war, and said to them, You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt, for our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel.

So the armed men left the captives in the spoil before the princes and all the assembly, and the men who had been mentioned by name rose and took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.

At that time King Ahaz sent the king of Assyria for help, for the Edomites had again invaded and defeated Judah and carried away captives, and the Philistines had made raids on the cities in the Sheffala and the Negev of Judah, and had taken Beshemesh, Ejilon, Gederoth, Soco with its villages, Timna with its villages, and Gimzo with its villages, and they settled there. For the Lord humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had made Judah act sinfully and had been very unfaithful to the Lord. So Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria came up against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him, for Ahaz took a portion from the house of the Lord and the house of the king and of the princes, and gave tribute to the king of Assyria, but it did not help him.

In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the Lord, this same king Ahaz, for he sacrificed the gods of Damascus that had defeated him, and said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel. And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and he shut up the

doors of the house of the Lord, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem.

In every city of Judah he made high places to make offerings to other gods, provoking to anger the Lord, the God of his fathers. Now the rest of his acts, and all his ways, from first to last, behold they are written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. And Ahaz slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city, in Jerusalem, for they did not bring him into the tombs of the kings of Israel.

And Hezekiah his son reigned in his place. 2 Chronicles chapter 28 records the reign of Ahaz in Judah. Following after his predecessors Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, and Jotham, all faithful kings to some extent, Ahaz completely breaks this trend.

He is a wicked and unfaithful king. His sins exceed even those of some of the worst of the Israelite kings. He performs abominations associated with the previous peoples of the land, the Canaanites.

He burns his sons as an offering. Besides sacrificing an offering on all the high places and hills, and under every green tree. As a consequence of his great sin, the Lord gives him into the hand of his enemies.

He is attacked on every single side. He is attacked by the king of Syria, who defeats him and takes captive a great number of his people. He suffers a devastating loss at the hand of the king of Israel.

He is also attacked by the Edomites and the Philistines. And when he turns to Assyria for help, Assyria ends up afflicting him rather than strengthening him. On every single side, Judah is being broken down.

They are attacked on their west by the Philistines, to the east by Aram, the Syrians. At their south, they are attacked by the Edomites. And at the north, they are attacked by their brothers Israel.

Ahaz's loss in battle to Pekah the son of Ramallah is of totally epic proportions. 120,000 people killed, all of them fighting men. This might well be about half the army wiped out in a single day.

And besides losing a great number of his army, he also loses Maseah, his son, and two key figures of the nobility, Azraqam and Elkanah. As if this weren't enough, 200,000 of their relatives are taken captive and brought to Samaria with much spoil. It is hard to imagine a more utter defeat than this.

However, 2nd Chronicles chapter 28 has a twist in the tale. In the centre of the chapter, a surprising event occurs. In the context of apostate nations in the north and in the south, in Israel and Judah, God speaks to his people.

He speaks by a prophet named Oded, an Israelite prophet that declares that Judah has been given into the hand of Israel on account of its great sin, but that Israel and its bloodthirstiness puts itself in great jeopardy. Its sins are no less great, and the Lord's judgment will come upon it too. If Israel does not turn back from the action that it has taken with Judah, then it will be in danger of inviting even more speedy judgment upon itself.

Most surprisingly, the men of Samaria respond. Chiefs of the men prevent them from bringing the captives into Samaria and tell them to send them back. The armed men respond faithfully too, as the chiefs of Ephraim had listened to the prophet Oded, so they listen to the chiefs of Ephraim.

They leave the captives with them. In an action that is truly astonishing in the context, they act with mercy towards these captives. They take the captives and clothe all the naked among them.

They give them sandals, they provide them with food and drink, they anoint them, they carry all the feeble on donkeys, and they escort them back to their own people at Jericho. As these two brother nations hurtle towards the abyss of exile together, for just a brief moment they are reminded that they are brother peoples, that they both belong to the Lord their God who has brought them in, and who is angry on account of their unfaithfulness. From this brief recognition of brotherhood under God, this great act of mercy can take place.

God is here also showing a reprieve to Ahaz and the southern kingdom. Despite their great wickedness, he does not utterly destroy them. He spares them the full force of the fate that they deserve.

Ahaz is the one who brings misery upon the people. Through his unfaithfulness, he brings enemies upon them from all sides. And Ahaz's response to his distress, even when the Lord has shown him such great mercy in it, is to become even more faithless.

He turns to the gods of the oppressor nations and abandons the worship of the Lord. He shuts up the doors of the house of the Lord, he makes himself altars in all parts of Jerusalem, and he gathers together the vessels of the house of the Lord and cuts them in pieces. The king, whose responsibility it was to establish true worship, actually establishes high places and their worship to other gods in every single part of Judah.

Later on in the story of scripture we find a surprising callback to this chapter. There is a story that has many of the same details. The attentive reader of the parable of the Good Samaritan might be struck by some specific geographical references.

Jerusalem, Jericho, and Samaria. These geographical references might not be significant by themselves, but when we notice that many further details of the story of 2 Chronicles

28 are repeated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we might start to pay some attention. The captives of Judah and Jerusalem are like men who have fallen among thieves.

Judah has suffered a great loss of life, and many of those remaining will be weak and badly wounded. The half-dead man from Jerusalem in Jesus' parable corresponds to the men of Judah, crushed and plundered on account of their sin. Oded the prophet came before the army returning to Samaria and informed them of the jeopardy in which they were placing themselves on account of their sin.

The Judahites were their brethren, members of the same covenant people. This serves to expose the true significance of the question of the neighbour in Jesus' parable. The question, who is my neighbour, is inextricably connected with the question of the membership of the people of God.

In his treatment of the parable N.T. Wright reminds us of the question that is hovering in the background, who are the people who will inherit the kingdom? The question of the neighbour is the same question from a different perspective, who are my fellow heirs? In identifying the Judahite captives as the brethren of the men of Israel, Oded was making clear that they were the nearest of neighbours within the bond of the covenant. The way that the men of Samaria treated their covenant neighbours, the Judahites, the people to whom they had the most immediate and most pronounced of duties, was a matter that could provoke the anger of the Lord and that could lead to covenant judgment upon them. Those who refuse to recognize their brethren will find themselves removed from the family.

In the actions that followed the prophetic rebuke of Oded, the men of Samaria expressed their kinship with the Judahites. The Samaritan in Jesus' parable does the same. He places the man upon his own animal and pays for him out of his own pocket.

In the despised Samaritan and the half-dead Judahite, we see the two halves of the divided kingdom in 2 Chronicles 28. As in 2 Chronicles 28, through the neighbourly act of the Samaritan or Samaritans, these two parties are being restored in the familial bond of the covenant. For the briefest window of time, there is a vision of how things could be otherwise.

A question to consider, how could the act of mercy inspired by the words of the prophet Oded have served as a lesson to Israel and Judah about a different way that they could take? Acts chapter 8 verses 4 to 25. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.

And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud

voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city.

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the power of God that is called great. And they paid attention to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For he had not fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter said to him, May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. And Simon answered, Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.

Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. In Acts chapter 8, the mission of the early church starts to move beyond Jerusalem. Verse 4 is a transitional text.

God is achieving his purposes through his enemies. The persecution faced by the church in Jerusalem encourages the spread of the movement. At this point, it might also seem that the Jerusalem Christians have an advantage of not having deep roots within Jerusalem.

They had sold their property, their tent pegs had been removed, and now they can move on. Persecution here is a mechanism of fulfilling chapter 1 verse 8, the calling to go beyond Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. In this way,

Stephen's death ends up kicking off the mission.

The scattering that happens to the church could be a negative thing or it could be a positive thing. People can be scattered as a form of judgment. They can also be scattered as a sowing of seed.

The Christians of Jerusalem are now being sown among the nations, sown throughout the empire, where they will have a much broader influence. Philip is one of those scattered and it is in Philip that the movement from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria occurs. The Samaritans are an important feature of Luke's gospel.

A Samaritan village does not receive Christ in chapter 9 verses 51 to 56. There is the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10 verses 33 to 35. There is the return of the Samaritan leper to express his thanks to Christ in chapter 17 verses 16 to 18.

In 2 Kings chapter 17 we read that after Israel was deported by the Assyrians, the Assyrians repopulated the land with people from other nations, pagan peoples. Presumably there would have been a remnant of Israelites in the land and now they've been mixed with these other groups of people. Samaritan villagers would have largely spoken Aramaic but in the larger towns and cities they would probably have spoken Greek and would have been largely Hellenized.

They are neither Orthodox Jews nor Gentiles. In the conversation between Jesus and the woman of Samaria in John chapter 4 we have a window into some of the disputes that existed between the Samaritans and the Orthodox Jews. They worshipped the same God but they were somewhere in between Jews and Gentiles.

For the Samaritans their holy mountain was Mount Gerizim whereas the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. A number of candidates have been put forward for the city that Philip probably came to in this chapter. Some have suggested that the city was Sebaste.

Sebaste was a Gentile city in the Samaritan region. It was built on the site of the old Samaria and was also a capital. Sychar, Gitto, Shechem and others have all been suggested.

It is likely impossible to be certain on what city it was besides the fact that it was an important centre of Samaritan population. Philip was introduced back in Acts chapter 6 and now he becomes a focus of the narrative. His ministry is accompanied by signs.

Unclean spirits are cast out, paralyzed people are healed and lame persons are healed too. In Philip we see that it's not just the apostles that perform signs. Other leaders of the early church are performing signs too.

During the initial stages of the church's mission in a particular region the signs and wonders would have played an important confirmatory role. The signs were the signs of

the kingdom. In Luke chapter 7 verse 22 Jesus describes the signs that he performs.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. This also draws upon Old Testament prophecy such as Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5 to 6. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

As Scott Spencer observes Philip is a character juxtaposed with Simon the sorcerer. Simon works wonders in verse 11. Philip works wonders in verses 6 and 13.

Simon draws crowds in verses 9 to 10. Philip draws crowds in verses 6 to 7. The people pay attention to Simon in verses 10 to 11. The people pay attention to Philip in verse 6. Simon is a great power in verse 10.

Philip performs great powers in verse 13. Simon amazes the Samaritans with his claims and with his magic in verses 9 and 11. And Philip's miracles amaze the Samaritans in verse 13.

Craig Keener adds to this. He observes the contrast between Simon claiming to be someone great in verses 9 and 19 and Philip only acting in the name of Jesus in verses 12 and 16. There are a number of confrontations or contrasts with sorcerers and people performing magic arts in the book of Acts.

Paul has a conflict with Elmas Bargesis in chapter 13 verses 6 to 11. Paul and Silas confront the Philippian slave girl in chapter 16 verses 16 to 24. And perhaps we could also include the failed exorcism attempts of the sons of Sceva in chapter 19 verses 13 to 16.

Magic was a source of fascination and fear in the ancient world. Potions and poisons, the invoking of spirits and demons, divination and a lot of other such practices were an important part of life in ancient society. Along with various forms of idolatry, this was part of the old order that the advent of the gospel disrupted.

In the Old Testament we read of conflicts with the magicians in Pharaoh's court. In Moses and Aaron, particularly in the first three plays, the Lord proved that his power exceeded that of the arts of the Egyptian magicians. Simon Magus is mentioned by a number of people in early Christian tradition.

Justin Martyr, about a century later, who himself came from the region of Samaria, wrote of Simon Magus. But much that he reports was probably later embellishment of the story. Simon claimed to be someone great and many scholars have read this as a claim to some sort of deity.

However when the gospel came on the scene with Philip, there was a widespread

conversion in response. The Samaritans were baptised, which might have been a surprise to observing Jews. They were baptised without the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans seeming to provide an obstacle.

The question of which earthly mountain you're supposed to worship upon is of slightly less import when the Lord is establishing a new temple. Simon the sorcerer is also described as having believed at this point, presumably in response to signs. This is an indication of the greater power of Christ and his name over the magical arts of people such as Simon.

In verses 14 to 17, news reaches Jerusalem of the success of the Samaritan mission and they send Peter and John to confirm it. They must acknowledge the validity and the membership of the Samaritans. The new Davidic king has been established in Judah and now the remnant of the northern kingdom must be joined with them so that as one people they might go forward.

Such acts of mutual recognition are very important in the history of the church. They are a sign of the unity of the church and the Christ that exceeds all the differences that might divide us. The Samaritans had been baptised by Philip but they had not yet received the spirit.

They received the spirit as the apostles lay their hands upon them. The church is one apostolic church. It is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets and it's important that the Samaritan mission is built on the same foundation as the rest of the church.

Seeing the power of Peter to communicate the gift of the Holy Spirit by laying hands upon people, Simon the sorcerer seeks to buy the gift from him. He sees this power as something that can be bought with money. He seeks to buy office.

Throughout the book of Acts, money has been an important theme. Judas betrayed Christ for silver. The early church sold their property in order to give money to the poor.

Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit over money and now Simon the sorcerer is another example of someone led astray by his love for money. In his desire for money and power he risks his ruin. The sin of simony, the buying and selling of church office and other such sacred things is derived from Simon the sorcerer's name.

One of the things that Simon presumes is that if he has power and wealth and influence he ought to be able to use these things to gain status and privilege within the church but that is not how the kingdom of God works. Peter, who could be juxtaposed with Simon, there are two Simons in the story, rebukes Simon in the very harshest of terms. Simon the sorcerer as Peter presents him is standing in the very greatest spiritual jeopardy.

If he does not repent he and his money will perish together. He does present Simon with

hope though. He must pray to the Lord and Simon seemingly penitent calls upon Peter to pray for him.

One of the things that the story of Simon the sorcerer reveals is the great danger among early converts of trying to put the gospel and the message of the Christian faith into the structures that were familiar from pagan practice. Even though they might accept Christ they might try and fit Christ within the familiar framework of the old pagan ways. The Russian orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann described the effect of a sort of piety that coloured everything that was received about the Christian faith.

He describes what he calls mysteriological piety as a faithing cult in its saving and sanctifying power. He observes the way that this pattern of piety inherited from paganism influenced so much about Christianity's development in those early years. It led to the idea of the church as a sanctifying cult, something that makes people holy through its buildings, through its practices, through its rites, through its clergy.

Simon the sorcerer is another example of a sort of piety that could be taken to the Christian message. Simon the sorcerer thinks in terms of magic and power and he sees the gospel in those frames too. Familiar with the system of magic he thinks that the gospel can be slotted into that same pattern.

Just as one might be able to buy magical arts from someone he expects that he should be able to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit. Simon needs to learn that this is not the way that the kingdom of Christ works at all. A question to consider, why don't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they first believe? Why do you think that they have to wait until Peter and John lay their hands upon them?