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Atoning for the sin of Saul concerning the Gibeonites. A new temple formed of Jews and Gentiles.

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

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Transcript

2 Samuel 21. Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year, and David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, There is blood guilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death.

So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.

And David said to the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you, and how shall I make atonement that you may bless the heritage of the Lord? The Gibeonites said to him, It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house, neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel. And he said, What do you say that I shall do for you? They

said to the king, The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord. And the king said, I will give them.

But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the Lord that was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. The king took the two sons of Rizpah, the daughter of Ea, whom she bore to Saul, Ammoni and Mephibosheth, and the five sons of Merab, the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel, the son of Barzillai, the Meholathite, and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites. And they hanged them on the mountain before the Lord, and the seven of them perished together.

They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest. Then Rizpah, the daughter of Ea, took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell upon them from the heavens. And she did not allow the birds of the air to come upon them by day, or the beasts of the field by night.

When David was told what Rizpah, the daughter of Ea, the concubine of Saul, had done, David went and took the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan from the men of Jabesh-Gilead, who had stolen them from the public square of Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hanged them, on the day the Philistines killed Saul on Gilboa. And he brought up from there the bones of Saul and the bones of his son Jonathan, and they gathered the bones of those who were hanged. And they buried the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan in the land of Benjamin, in Zeala.

In the tomb of Kish his father. And they did all that the king commanded. And after that God responded to the plea for the land.

There was war again between the Philistines and Israel. And David went down together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines. And David grew weary.

And Ish-baib-Bin-Ab, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was armed with a new sword, thought to kill David. But Abishai, the son of Zerariah, came to his aid and attacked the Philistine and killed him. Then David's men swore to him, You shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel.

After this there was again war with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sivaki the Hushethite struck down Saph, who was one of the descendants of the giants. And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob.

And El-Hanan the son of Jeorah-Aragam the Bethlehemite struck down Goliath the Gittite,

the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam. And there was again war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number, and he also was descended from the giants. And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down.

These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants. 2 Samuel chapter 21 begins the concluding section of the book. It is out of chronological sequence in all likelihood.

The story raises troubling questions as well, as the sons of Saul are killed on account of his sin against the Gibeonites. David is having here to deal with the legacy of Saul's sin, the guilt of which lies upon the nation. The Gibeonites were of the remnant of the Ammonites, a remaining people of the land.

They were to be wiped out in the conquest, but they had been spared on account of the treaty that they made with Joshua, a treaty made under deceptive conditions in Joshua chapter 9. In verses 3 to 6 of that chapter we read, They successfully persuaded Joshua and the Israelites that they were from a far country. They made a covenant and swore an oath before discovering three days later that they were inhabitants of the land. However, having made a covenant, they were not allowed to destroy their cities.

As a result of their covenant, they were spared, but they were made woodcutters and drawers of water for the congregation, servants of the tabernacle. They then came under the protection of God as they were devoted to his service, as his possession. Consequently, anyone who attacked them committed a particularly serious offence.

They were attacking the people that had been claimed by the Lord. There is no biblical account of Saul's attack upon the Gibeonites. However, the war between David and Ishbosheth began at Gibeon.

Gibeon in Joshua chapter 10 verse 2 was described as being a great city, like one of the royal cities. We learn in 1 Chronicles chapter 21 verse 29 that the tabernacle, minus the Ark of the Covenant, was based at Gibeon. The Gibeonites were the servants of the Lord's house, so it was not surprising that the tabernacle would end up being based in their city.

Gibeon was also in the territory of Benjamin, so one can readily imagine that there were tensions between the Benjaminites, who felt that the Gibeonite cities were theirs by right, and the Gibeonites who had been spared to live in them. In chapter 4 verses 2 to 3 we discover that the Beerothites, men of the city of Beeroth, also in Benjamin's wider territory, had fled. Beeroth was another city of the Gibeonites, so it seems likely that during Saul's reign there had been some attempt to drive the Gibeonites out, even though they were under the Lord's special protection.

It is not unlikely that Saul wanted Gibeon to be his royal city, the site of his throne and of the tabernacle. That the conflict between David as the king of Judah and Ish-Pesheth as the king of Israel began at Gibeon was possibly a sign that this was a more determined purpose on the part of the Saulide dynasty. The judgement is not just against Saul as well, it is also against his house.

It seems as though wiping out the Gibeonites had not merely been the action of Saul, but was also the action of the people around him. The Gibeonites had been under the Herum ban in the original conquest, though they had been spared. The Amalekites had also been placed under the ban, and Saul had failed to bring God's judgement upon them.

Maybe Saul is trying to recover himself from the judgement that fell upon him. Saul has also wiped out the priests who served the tabernacle. The Gibeonites were their servants.

Perhaps he sought to exterminate the Gibeonites at the same time. We don't know why exactly Saul attacked the Gibeonites, but doing so was a very serious offence, and the Lord brought a famine upon the land for three years in the days of David on account of it. After David sought the face of the Lord, the Lord told him that it was on account of the sin of Saul concerning the Gibeonites.

The whole of the nation is suffering on account of the sin of their representative, even their former representative. We might also recall the example of Achan's sin here. The whole congregation suffered defeated Ai, and the threat of losing their stake in the land, as a result of Achan's sin concerning the devoted things.

Here the whole nation is suffering because Saul killed the devoted persons. Unless David deals with the national guilt somehow, they will all suffer most severely. Achan was judged for his sin by being killed, with himself and his whole household.

It is difficult to understand why Saul's sons would be put to death for his sin, without considering the way that the ban works. This isn't a regular criminal punishment taking place here. In such cases a son must not be put to death for the sin of his father, even though he may suffer the consequences of his father's sin.

However, when Achan took the devoted things, the whole congregation came under the ban until they cut off Achan himself. As Achan took the devoted things, his entire family became the object of the ban themselves, and they were all destroyed. Saul's sin was of a similar type.

This wasn't just a regular act of murder. When God put his mark upon Cain, the person who killed Cain would suffer sevenfold judgment. The Gibeonites are devoted to God.

They have his mark on them, as it were. So they are avenged sevenfold upon the house of Saul. Again we should consider that Saul's action wasn't just an action of Saul himself,

but was seemingly an action within which his wider house was involved.

When David talks to the Gibeonites, they say that silver and gold won't solve the problem. Financial restitution cannot atone for murder. They aren't in a position to put anyone to death in Israel.

David promises to act on their behalf, though. At the Gibeonites' request, David gives them seven of Saul's sons, who were killed and then hung up as a sign of the curse upon them. David spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, but delivered the five sons of Merab and the two sons of Rispeh, another one of whom was called Mephibosheth.

As we see in Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 22-23, hanging was a serious symbolic act. And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

However, it seems that the Gibeonites want to bring the fuller measure of the curse upon the sons of Saul. This is described in Deuteronomy chapter 28, verse 26. And your dead body shall be food for all the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.

They were hanged on public display on the mountain before the Lord, at the beginning of the barley harvest, and were to be left there until rain fell upon them, which would be a sign that the drought that was presumably causing the famine that had come upon the land was over. The expected rain might well have been an unseasonal sign, as Saul's sons were killed at the beginning of the barley harvest, around the time of Passover, and the regular rains wouldn't be expected until much later in the year. Being hung on the mountain before the Lord was probably on the mountain opposite the tabernacle at Gibeon.

All of this might make us think of Christ, who was hung on the mountain before the Lord, as the one bearing the curse upon the people, so that the rain of the Holy Spirit might finally come upon once parched land. However, while leaving them on display before the rains might have been the initial plan, the commendable actions of the pitiable Rizpah towards her son's corpses seems to have led to a change of plans. Rizpah was Saul's concubine, previously mentioned when Ish-bosheth accused Abner of going into her in chapter 4. Rizpah prevented the full curse from coming upon Saul's sons, and arrested the grisly spectacle.

David recovered the bones of Saul and Jonathan, which had been taken by the men of Jabesh-gilead from the Philistines, who had displayed their bodies in a similar manner, and buried them, along with the bones of the hanged sons of Saul, in the tomb of Saul's father Kish in Benjamin. Then God finally responded to the pleas for rain, and restored

the land after the famine. Behind all of this, David is dealing with the bitter legacy of Saul's sins, and atonement is occurring for the whole nation.

Even though Saul has died and been judged, the nation itself bears the guilt and the consequences of his crimes, and until they are properly dealt with, the nation cannot move on. The story of David began with giant killing, and here, toward the end of David's story, giants appear again. We read of four of David's men who struck down giants.

David, their leader, was a giant killer, and they follow in his footsteps. A problem is raised by the character of El-Hanan, who strikes down Goliath the Gittite. El-Hanan is presumably the same as the member of David's 30 mighty men, mentioned in chapter 23, verse 24.

However, the real problem is the claim that he killed Goliath. Many suggestions have been made here. Perhaps Goliath was a common name, or a name used for certain giants more generally.

More likely, however, the actual name of the giant was dropped out in the transmission of the text, and the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles, chapter 20, verse 5, gives us the proper sense here. And there was again war with the Philistines, and El-Hanan the son of Jeor struck down Lamai, the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam. A question to consider.

How might careful consideration of the judgment upon the sin of Saul concerning the Gibeonites help us to think about the notion of corporate guilt? How might it help us better to understand the judgment upon Adam's sin, and to understand Christ's atonement? Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 11 to 22. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near.

But through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Paul began Ephesians chapter 2 by focusing upon God's work in the lives of his recipients in a more general fashion. Now, however, he focuses his attention more directly upon what God has done for them as a body of people, especially as Gentiles. Once again he describes their previous condition.

Their condition was one of outsidership and otherness relative to the Jewish people of God. They were separated from Christ, detached from all of the blessings found in the Messiah. They were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, cut off from the many benefits enjoyed by Israel as the people of God.

They were strangers to the covenants of promise, foreigners to the promises and to the bond that united God to his people and assured them of future blessings. In many ways this second half of Ephesians chapter 2 is covering the ground covered by the first half of the chapter, yet on a higher level. The first time around our attention was focused upon the deliverance from spiritual death and entrance into new spiritual life, but now we are focusing upon our deliverance from alienation, separation and exclusion and our entrance into a new body of fellowship.

The previous condition was one in which Jews and Gentiles, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, were divided from each other. Gentiles were cut off from the Messiah, who was the king of the Jews, not their king. They did not enjoy the blessings enjoyed by Israel, who had the oracles of God entrusted to them, among other things.

They were not included in the covenants and they were without God in the world. They were not marked out by his name as the Jewish people were. Paul is here describing a state of separation, a state of being excluded that is operating on several interrelated levels.

New Testament passages such as this can be slightly perplexing to many readers. The close attention that the apostle Paul gives to addressing categories of circumcised and uncircumcised, Jew and Gentile, can seem quite foreign to us, belonging to a way of ordering the world and its peoples that has long since passed. Furthermore, why such categories should have any bearing upon or relevance to the operations of God's grace is unclear.

After this passage, Paul proceeds to argue that he has been entrusted with the revelation of a great mystery, hidden in ages past, which has since been revealed, the mystery that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. If this is the great mystery that the world has been waiting for, something about it seems anticlimactic. From our vantage point, the revelation might seem a little like a damp squib.

I suspect that much of our struggle to appreciate the significance of the mystery arises from our failure to recognize the centrality and character of the Church in Paul's understanding of salvation. For Paul, the formation of the Church as a concrete historical polity is not a sideshow in his account of Christ's work. It's a central feature.

In verses 11-12, Paul calls upon the Ephesians to remember their former state, that of uncircumcised Gentiles, aliens from the Commonwealth of Israel, etc. As Stephen Fowle

highlights, the designation Gentile only made sense within Judaism or in relation to Judaism. Within these verses, Paul is calling upon the heroes of the epistle to reconceive their past, to regard their former identities in a manner that is only possible from an in-Christ vantage point.

The retrospective nature of this characterization is noteworthy. Few non-Jews would have considered themselves naturally to be having no hope and no God in the world, nor would they have thought of themselves as being alienated. Fowle writes, This act of remembering their past as a Gentile past has a dual function.

First, by recalling their state as Gentiles before God, the Ephesians can come to see themselves in the very particular ways in which God saw them. It is equally important, however, that by remembering their past as a Gentile past, a past that is thereby in relation, albeit a negative one, to Judaism, Paul can begin to describe more precisely the nature of the reconciliation accomplished in Christ. In fact, if Christians fail to grasp this, they may end up misperceiving what is involved in reconciliation today.

In the process of describing the Ephesians' former identity, Paul also unsettles Jewish categories. The word called, preceding both the uncircumcision and the circumcision, suggests that Paul questioned the legitimacy or the significance of these designations, an impression that is bolstered by the clause that follows, which is made in the flesh by hands. Made by hands is elsewhere used of pagan idols or shrines, Daniel 5, Acts 17, demonstrating their insufficiency to accommodate or to represent God.

In the New Testament it is also used in reference to the Jerusalem Temple, where it draws attention to the transitory character of the edifice. Likewise, the term flesh in Paul is typically contrasted with the spirit and its efficacy in the New Covenant. In suggesting his contestation of these Jewish categories, Paul is probably subtly directing the attention of his hearers to a more fundamental circumcision of the heart by the spirit promised in the New Covenant.

Paul declares that the Gentiles who were once alienated are brought near through the blood of Christ in verse 13. Some hearing Paul's argument to this point might be wrong-footed by the expectation that the Gentiles will have been brought near by being made members of Israel. They are brought near, however, not by being made members of Israel, but by becoming members of an entirely new polity, the Church.

Once again, that which affects our deliverance is the work of Christ. Here, interestingly though, it is the death of Christ that is more foregrounded, whereas in the earlier section it was the resurrection that was the focus. Paul's point here about what Christ accomplished in his cross is similar to that which he made in Colossians 2, verses 13-14.

Christ brings about peace, breaking down division. He deals with the law that locks the Jews up and locks the Gentiles out. Christ doesn't just bring peace, though.

As Paul puts it here, He Himself is our peace. Some have seen here a reference to the dividing wall between the outer and the inner area of the temple, the latter being restricted to Jews only. This is likely somewhere in the background, especially as he goes on to talk about a new temple being formed, but Paul's point is more general.

This has all occurred in Christ's flesh, and it has occurred through the way that Christ deals with the law. The law stood against both Jews and Gentiles in different ways. It locked the Jews up under its condemnation, while it locked the Gentiles out.

The law is abolished as the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. In Colossians 2, verse 14, a similar expression refers especially to the law as a set of ascetic regulations. It might be most appropriate to see this as an abolishing of the law, as a system of flesh regulation.

The law is, of course, fulfilled, as Paul makes plain in Romans chapter 8 and elsewhere, but its fulfillment is a transformation. It is no longer the caterpillar of commandments expressed in ordinances, but the butterfly of life in the Spirit. The obstacle of the law can be dealt with, of course, because the flesh and the condemnation that lies over it have been dealt with.

The consequence is the peace of which he is speaking, peace between Jews and Gentiles and among men, and peace with God. Enmity has been removed. Christ's message of peace, the message of the gospel, has been declared to those who were far off, Gentiles, and to those who were near, Jews, and it has been declared to both alike.

It is interesting to observe the way that Paul speaks of Christ himself giving this message. Christ is so involved with and active with and identified with his messengers, that when his messengers speak to us, it is as if he himself was speaking directly to us. The peace that we enjoy is one by which we both alike have access through Christ in the one Spirit to the Father.

Once again, the underlying Trinitarian grammar of Paul's gospel can be seen here. We are already here getting an intimation of the argument that he will make in chapter 4 too, where the unity of the Church is closely connected to the oneness of God. The death of Christ overcomes not only the condemnation that Israel lies under, but also the division within the human race.

In Christ, the quarantining of Israel from the nations has ended, and one new undivided humanity can be formed of the two. The reconciliation of the divided humanity is accomplished as both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God, enjoying access in one Spirit to the Father. The human race is united as it draws near to God.

Paul describes our state following the work of Christ in verses 19-22. No longer strangers and aliens, but full members of the household of God, with all of God's other holy people.

Paul infuses his architectural imagery with organic imagery.

We are a structure that is joined together which is growing into a holy temple for God's dwelling place. Verses 21-22 are parallel to chapter 4 verses 15-16, where Paul writes, Here the accent is upon the organic rather than the architectural imagery, but the parallel is illuminating. The notion of a living and growing temple body is not exclusive to Paul, but can be found in other New Testament passages such as John 2-19-21 and 1 Peter 2-5.

It is also implicit in the imagery of Acts 2 and the day of Pentecost. This temple, this building in which Jew and Gentile are brought together in fellowship with God, is built up in conformity to Christ through acts of communication, speaking the truth in love, and acts of loving mutual service. It is this international body of persons that is the temple within which God now dwells.

This claim is absolutely integral to Paul's understanding of the Christian message. Essential to the progress of the building project is the establishment of loving communication and service between Jews and Gentiles. Even with the wall of division between them removed, the edifice of the new temple would risk being riven in twain by a huge crack, were such bonds between Jews and Gentiles not formed and maintained.

This, of course, is one of the reasons why Paul expresses such passionate concern about the situation in Antioch that he recounts in Galatians chapter 2, where Jews were withdrawing from fellowship with Gentiles. The eschatological temple is a feat of international relations springing up out of the overflowing grace of the gospel. As contemporary Christians reading these passages, we can fumble for conceptual rationales for the intensity of Paul's concern to hold Jews and Gentiles together.

The principles that most readily present themselves to the consciousness of readers informed by the tradition of Western liberalism are typically those of inclusivity, equality, and non-discrimination. Yet these principles have seldom fuelled quite such an intense impulse towards the concrete outworking of unity between people groups, as Paul displays in these epistles. They can commonly focus our attention primarily upon individuals rather than concrete historical communities of people.

In focusing upon such categories, we risk missing the character of Paul's concerns and his understanding. Paul's point has less to do with an abstract principle of the equality of individuals and much more to do with the overcoming of divisions between peoples within the arena of history. The oneness he declares is not primarily a rejection of the significance of the differences between Jews and Gentiles, but his insistence that difference no longer presents a division or obstacle.

It has been traversed by the grace of Christ's gospel. Likewise, the unity he proclaims does not straightforwardly underwrite liberal values of inclusivity and non-discrimination.

The inclusion and non-discrimination that Paul proclaims is not founded upon absolute moral principle, but upon a historical achievement.

It is a unity that has been brought forth from a prior situation of divinely established exclusion and discrimination. God had elected Israel, and the Gentiles were excluded from that. The mystery is that God's purpose was that this discrimination and exclusion should one day serve the blessing of all.

The difference between Jews and Gentiles established by the Torah is of great importance to Paul, although he presents this difference in terms of its penultimacy to the new covenant order of the Church. The significance given to the difference between those who were aliens and strangers and those who were citizens and members of the household, between those who were near and those who were far off, is a reminder that the Church is a polity forged through God's decisive action with distinct peoples in history. Differences are not necessarily expunged in this new order.

Love and grace are particularizing. They address us all in our uniqueness. But the divisions they once established are traversed by the working of God's grace.

As the new organic human temple is built up, it is a light to the world, a pattern of how things really ought to be, a foretaste of the future, where the nations give up the ways of war and join together as one to feast at God's table. A question to consider, what might it mean that the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets?