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February 17th: Jeremiah 47 & Romans 2

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The destruction of the Philistines. The impartiality of God's righteous judgment.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 47. The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the Philistines, before Pharaoh struck down Gaza. Thus says the Lord, Behold waters are rising out of the north, and shall become an overflowing torrent.

They shall overflow the land and all that fills it, the city and those who dwell in it. Men shall cry out, and every inhabitant of the land shall wail, at the noise of the stamping of the hooves of his stallions, at the rushing of his chariots, at the rumbling of their wheels. The fathers look not back to their children, so feeble are their hands, because of the day that is coming to destroy all the Philistines, to cut off from Tyre and Sidon every helper that remains.

For the Lord is destroying the Philistines, the remnant of the coastland of Catho. Baldness has come upon Gaza, Ashkelon has perished, O remnant of their valley, how long will you gash yourselves? O sword of the Lord, how long till you are quiet? Put

yourself into your scabbard, rest and be still. How can it be quiet, when the Lord has given it a charge? Against Ashkelon and against the seashore he has appointed it.

Jeremiah's oracles against the nations continue in chapter 47 with a prophecy against the Philistines. The Philistines, particularly in the years of the early kingdom, had been a powerful force within the land, representing an important enemy in the time of Saul and David. Before that time they had struck a terrible blow against the Israelites in defeating them at the battle of Aphek.

That had led to the breakdown of the Old Tabernacle Order. The Judge Samson had also fought against them on several occasions. References to the Philistines go all the way back to the book of Genesis.

Both Abraham and Isaac sojourned with the Philistines for a period of time, and then even before that we have a reference to the Philistines in Genesis chapter 10 verses 13-14 in the table of nations. Egypt father Ludim, Animim, Lehibim, Naphtuim, Pathrutim, Kasluhim, from whom the Philistines came, and Kapturim. By this point in history the Philistines were not big players in the region.

They came under the power of the Egyptians and Babylonians. Like the Judahites during this period, they were caught in the middle of these great powers and their fate was largely determined by the rising and falling of those great powers prospects. They had formerly been important as an Egyptian satellite and one of the powers through which the Egyptians maintained their dominance within the land.

The location of this oracle immediately after that concerning the Egyptians in chapter 46 is probably for this reason. The prophecies of this chapter concern the judgement and the destruction that is going to be brought upon Philistia from the north, from Babylon. However the prophecy is dated from before Pharaoh struck down Gaza.

Philistia is going to experience an attack from the north, from the Babylonians, and then an attack from the south, from the Egyptians. After this there will come a further attack and a more decisive attack from the north. The series of events referred to in this prophecy likely start with the attack of Nebuchadnezzar upon Ashkelon and Ekron in 604 BC.

We might reasonably presume that Gaza was attacked at the same time. It seems most probable that the Egyptian attack that is mentioned in verse 1 occurred around 600 BC as the Egyptians sought to gain back control of this strategic coastal area. However a few years later in 598-597 BC the Babylonians attacked again and this time the Egyptians did not strike back.

While the Egyptians had won a limited victory around 600 BC it was not to last. In 2 Kings 24.7 we read The prophecy compares the rise of Babylon to the rising of waters in

the north that are going to come down and inundate the whole land of the Philistines. Like a flash flood it is rapidly rising, it is going to come down quickly, it is going to overflow the whole land and wash them all away.

The disaster coming from the north should remind us of the opening chapter. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. Neither the cities nor the countryside of the land are going to escape this judgment.

The prophet paints a vivid picture of rapidly approaching chariots, stamping horses, dust rising behind them and the thundering of wheels as the great army of the Babylonians approaches. Faced with this immense force the Philistines prove powerless, their hands droop down, they do not even have the strength to go back and rescue their own children. The Babylonians coming upon them will be the end of Philistia as a nation.

With the fall of Philistia Tyre and Sidon will be left without supporters also. In verse 4 the Philistines are described as the remnant of the coastland of Kaphtor. In the prophecy of Amos chapter 9 verse 7 the Philistines are described as having been brought from the land of Kaphtor.

Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel, declares the Lord? Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Kaphtor, and the Syrians from Ker? The exact location of Kaphtor is debated. It might be a reference to Crete. Verse 5 describes the situation of death.

Baldness has come upon Gaza. Shaving the head was a pagan way of mourning the dead, as was the gashing of oneself described at the end of the verse. Ashkelon has also been destroyed.

Historically there were five important cities in the Philistine pentapolis. Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath and Ashdod. Gath was destroyed by the Assyrian Sargon II in 711 BC.

Gaza wasn't completely destroyed by the Babylonians in 604 BC as it was retaken by the Egyptians in 600 BC. However we have references to the kings of Gaza and Ashkelon as captives in Babylon. The prophecy against the Philistines ends with an image of the sword of the Lord.

The Lord is behind all of this judgement. The symbolism of the devouring sword is also found elsewhere in scripture. Within Jeremiah itself we see such imagery again in chapter 50 verses A question to consider.

The prophecy against the Philistines in this chapter is distinguished in part by the fact that there is no reason given for the judgement upon the Philistines. How might the people first hearing this prophecy have interpreted the sort of judgement that it involved? Romans chapter 2 The prophecy against the Philistines in chapter 2 Romans

chapter 2 It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.

They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them, on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. But if you call yourself a Jew, and rely on the law, and boast in God, and know his will, and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law, and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law, for as it is written, the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. For circumcision indeed is of value, if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

So if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law, will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision, but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter.

His praise is not from man, but from God. Verses 18-32 of Romans chapter 1 were a characteristically Jewish condemnation of paganism. We find such a condemnation in various Jewish works, such as chapters 13-15 of the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon.

One could imagine many self-righteous persons nodding along with Paul's condemnation of idolatry and sexual immorality. Yet in chapter 2 Paul gives a diatribe against such imagined persons. Persons who, accustomed to standing in the position of the judge, confident in their natural standing with God, have never found themselves in the dark.

The person in verse 1 regards themselves as the exception, confident in their imagined right to judge and their immunity from judgment. However, whether pagan moralists or Jews presumptuously secure in their covenant status, they too are without excuse. They also sin in the same ways.

The idea that there is a class of sinners that excludes us is unsustainable. We should recall Paul's description in verses 29-32 of the preceding chapter. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

Such a condemnation flows very easily off the tongue of the judge. But if the judge were to step back and pay attention to what they were saying, they should observe that they themselves are guilty of various of the offences that they are condemning. When we adopt the position of the judge, we like to make excuses and allowances for our own sins, which we consider minor peccadillos relative to the serious offences of others.

While the person judging grants that the judgment of God rightly comes upon sinners, they use such judgment to present their superiority, without recognising that everyone comes under the general condemnation that Paul has just given. Texts such as the Wisdom of Solomon might exhibit a sort of Jewish exceptionalism, for instance, which simply does not reckon with the radical extent of sin, and the fact that even observant Jews aren't exempt from its spread. The position of the observant Jew that Paul has in mind might be that, while the sins of the pagans are damnable, God is more indulgent with the sins of Israel.

His kindness, forbearance and patience mean that Israel does not face the same harsh assessment. God views the sins of his people like an indulgent father. He lets things slide for Israel, because they are his favourite people.

However, God's kindness is designed to give us time for and encouragement to repentance, and hope of forgiveness, not to give us confidence in our impenitence. Those who don't repent treat God's kindness and forbearance as excusing or minimising sin, rather than as making repentance and forgiveness possible. Yet by using God's kindness to minimise their sin, they are merely compounding their initial sin with sustained impenitence and ingratitude to God's gracious extension of time and opportunity for repentance.

This is all storing up further wrath for themselves on the day of wrath, when God's just judgement will be disclosed. On that day, God's judgement will be impartial, delivered according to people's works. No one will get special allowances or exemptions.

Some persons will receive eternal life as they patiently persist in well-doing, seeking for glory, honour and immortality. Paul clearly believes that he is referring to a real, not a hypothetical group here. Some people genuinely will be justified on the last day, when they are judged according to their works.

Note that Paul doesn't say that such persons earn salvation. However, the judgement by which they are vindicated will be according to works. On the other hand, those who do

not obey the truth and seek their own ways rather than God's, will face divine wrath and terrible punishment.

This judgement will begin with Jews, but will also come to non-Jews. God is impartial and all who do good will receive glory, honour and peace. Again, there is no evidence that Paul regards this group as merely hypothetical.

How that can be the case when all the sinful and naturally deserving of judgement hasn't yet been made clear, but will be in time. Neither possession nor non-possession of the law excuses someone from divine judgement. When Paul talks about the law, he isn't speaking of some abstract universal moral standard, but about the law given to Israel, the Torah, which set them apart as a people to the Lord.

The assumption that mere possession of the Torah granted good standing with God is dangerously misguided. What matters is not the mere hearing of the Torah, but actual observance of it. Indeed, despite not possessing the law by birth, the words by nature in verse 14 should be related not to the doing of what the law requires, but to the non-possession of the law.

When a Gentile fulfils the moral requirements of the law, they have the reality at which the law always aimed at in themselves. The work of the law is written on their hearts. Paul here may be alluding to passages like Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31-34, which promise the writing of the law on the heart of once rebellious Israel, so that they would observe it from the heart.

Paul describes these Gentiles that show the work of the law written on their hearts as having some sort of awakened conscience, with their thoughts conflicting, sometimes accusing and sometimes excusing them. This active conscience bears witness to the law written on their hearts. Paul describes this judgment as according to his gospel.

We should notice how important Christ as future judge is in Pauline presentations of the gospel to Gentiles, perhaps especially something that we see in the book of Acts. Paul focuses upon the Jew who presumes upon his covenant status. This figure has been in view throughout, but now comes into direct focus.

This Jew believes that he enjoys a special status. The judge at the beginning of the chapter believed that he was immune to the judgment. The Jew here exalts himself as a teacher, without taking into account the fact that this exposes him to a stricter judgment, especially when his teaching is hypocritical.

Much of Jesus' teaching was directed against the hypocrisy of the religious teachers and authorities, who taught things that they did not themselves observe. The scriptures taught that, having been given the law, Israel was called to train their children up after them, that they were a light to the Gentiles, and that they had a special wisdom that

would make them stand out among the nations. However, while reveling in the supposed superiority that this granted them, many Jewish teachers were laying heavy burdens upon others, while not truly observing the law themselves.

The Jew here is not, I believe, a reference to the average, typical Jewish individual, so much as it is a reference to a hypothetical Jewish teacher that stands for the nation's teachers of the law more generally. While teaching against stealing, they devoured widow's houses and misappropriated funds given to God. While teaching that people must not commit adultery, they were known for their sexual infidelity and their compromising of marriage.

While teaching against idols, they were quite prepared to bend the rules when there was a chance to profit from trafficking and things dedicated to idols. Paul's point is not that every Jewish teacher is guilty of these things, but that these wrongs are so commonplace among them as to be a source and cause of scandal and dishonour to God's name. The Gentiles blaspheme God on account of their actions.

If Paul were making a similar point today, you could imagine him referencing things like child abuse. While only a small minority of priests and pastors may be guilty of this, this minority and the gross failure of wider church bodies to deal with them radically undermines the claims of those bodies to moral authority and a true teaching witness, and it brings the church and the name of God into disrepute in the society at large. God's concern for the holiness of his name and his people's profaning of it by their sin is a theme in the prophets.

For instance, Ezekiel 36, verses 20-23. Paul concludes this chapter by dramatically relativising circumcision. Circumcision is not just the Christian believer in general, it's the Jewish believer in particular.

The law and circumcision are indeed positive things, and have genuinely granted Jews a special status, as we will see as we go further on. However, they are only of value to true and faithful Jews. To other Jews who are unfaithful and unbelieving, they merely bring judgement.

And Israel has been fairly consistently unfaithful throughout its history. A question to consider. What are some ways in which Paul's challenge here might be applied to Christians and the church?