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January 7th: Jeremiah 6 & Galatians 6

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Alastair Roberts

The comprehensiveness of Jerusalem's corruption. Bearing one another's burdens, fulfilling the law of Christ.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 6. Flee for safety, O people of Benjamin, from the midst of Jerusalem. Blow the trumpet into Koah, and raise a signal on Beth-Hakarim, for disaster looms out of the north, and great destruction. The lovely and delicately bred I will destroy, the daughter of Zion.

Shepherds with their flock shall come against her, they shall pitch their tents around her, they shall pasture each in his place, prepare war against her. Arise, and let us attack at noon. Woe to us, for the day declines, for the shadows of evening lengthen.

Arise, and let us attack by night, and destroy her palaces. For thus says the Lord of hosts, Cut down her trees, cast up a siege mound against Jerusalem. This is the city that must be punished.

There is nothing but oppression within her, as a well keeps its water fresh, so she keeps fresh her evil. Violence and destruction are heard within her. Sickness and wounds are ever before me.

Be warned, O Jerusalem, lest I turn from you in disgust, lest I make you a desolation, an uninhabited land. Thus says the Lord of hosts, They shall glean thoroughly as a vine, the remnant of Israel. Like a grape-gatherer, pass your hand again over its branches.

To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn, they take no pleasure in it. Therefore I am full of the wrath of the Lord, I am weary of holding it in.

Pour it out upon the children in the street, and upon the gatherings of young men also. Both husband and wife shall be taken, the elderly and the very aged. Their houses shall be turned over to others, their fields and wives together.

For I will stretch out my hand against the inhabitants of the land, declares the Lord. For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain, and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace, when there is no peace.

Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall, at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord. Thus says the Lord, Stand by the roads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.

But they said, We will not walk in it. I set watchmen over you, saying, Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet. But they said, We will not pay attention.

Therefore hear, O nations, and know, O congregation, what will happen to them. Hear, O earth, behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to my words, and as for my law, they have rejected it. What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifice is pleasing to me.

Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I will lay before this people stumbling blocks against which they shall stumble, fathers and sons together, neighbor and friend shall perish. Thus says the Lord, Behold, a people is coming from the north country, a great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. They lay hold on bow and javelin, they are cruel and have no mercy.

The sound of them is like the roaring sea, they ride on horses, set in array as a man for battle. Against you, O daughter of Zion, we have heard the report of it, our hands fall

helpless, anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor. Go not out into the field, nor walk on the road, for the enemy has a sword, terror is on every side.

O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes, make mourning as for an only son, most bitter lamentation, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us. I have made you a tester of metals among my people, that you may know and test their ways. They are all stubbornly rebellious, going about with slanders.

They are bronze and iron, all of them act corruptly. The bellows blow fiercely, the lead is consumed by the fire, in vain the refining goes on, for the wicked are not removed. Rejected silver they are called, for the Lord has rejected them.

Jeremiah chapter 6 continues the preceding chapter's warning about imminent judgment. The chapter opens with a description of a rapidly approaching army from the north, similar to those of preceding chapters. The warning trumpet must be blown, signals must be sent to the watchmen, disaster is almost upon them.

A small window of opportunity remains to flee the doomed city. However, the elite of the city, who have complacently lived with its injustice, face destruction. The prophet singles out the high class women, who most powerfully symbolise the decadent indulgence of the unfaithful bride.

In their fashionable garments and in their refined manners, they are also the fullest expression of a society that through its oppression has created a mask over that oppression so that it might not be seen. They look delicate and lovely, but they are really rapacious and cruel. Isaiah chapter 3 verses 16-24 has a similar condemnation.

The headbands and the crescents, the pendants, the bracelets and the scarves, the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes and the amulets, the signet rings and nose rings, the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks and the handbags, the mirrors, the linen garments, the turbans and the veils. Instead of perfume there will be rotteness, and instead of a belt a rope, and instead of well set hair, baldness, and instead of a rich robe, a skirt of sackcloth, and branding instead of beauty. As if in stark contrast to these women, the city will be surrounded by shepherds with their flocks.

The besieging armies are described as if low class keepers of sheep, who are about to displace and topple the wealthy and decadent. We hear inside their camp as they are preparing for war. They want to attack as soon as possible, to make the most of a day of battle before the night comes.

And then, when the night comes, they also want to attack her palaces. And verse 6 makes clear that these people are not acting upon their own initiative. The Lord is directing and encouraging them in their siege.

He is urging them to set up the siege mound. The city must be punished, and they are

the instrument by which he will do so. She must be punished on account of her oppression and violence.

The Lord declares of her, sickness and wounds are ever before me. He has placed his name in the temple at the heart of this city that is rotten through and through. Indeed, the city is described not just as something fresh that became rotten, but as something that keeps its rottenness fresh.

In the most startling of images, the city is described as like a well of fresh water. But instead of fresh water, what is held inside the city is evil itself. The Lord warns his people of the threat of approaching judgment.

The Babylonians will be like gleaners who come after the harvest. The greater company of the people of Israel having already been harvested in judgment by the Assyrians, now the Babylonians will come to glean the remnant. These gleaners will be diligent in their task.

They will pass their hand again over the branches that have been appointed to them. The Lord tries to warn his people, but no one hears. Their ears are uncircumcised.

Like their hearts, they are unfit for the covenant. They have not been rendered fit for use. They are disobedient and resistant.

Like their idols, they have ears but cannot hear, eyes but cannot see. The word of the Lord itself has become an object of scorn to them. They dismiss and laugh at it.

Jeremiah, as the prophet of the Lord, has been given to bear the word of the Lord. And the word of the Lord is bubbling away within him. It is about to burst out upon the people.

He feels the anger of the Lord against the unfaithfulness of the people. Although he tries to resist expressing it, he must bring it forth. In speaking the word of the Lord, he pours out the wrath of the Lord upon all parts of the society of Jerusalem.

The children in the street, the gatherings of the young men, husband and wife, elderly and aged. The people are afflicted with greed and avarice. They covet unjust gain and they deal falsely with each other and with the word of the Lord.

And they will suffer a poetic judgment as a result. If they are greedy for the houses, fields and wives of others, then their houses, fields and wives will be given into the hand of a greedy foreign nation. The allusions to the tenth commandment should not be missed here.

We should also recall the curse of the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 30. You shall betroth the wife, but another man shall ravish her. You shall build a house, but

you shall not dwell in it.

You shall plant a vineyard, but you shall not enjoy its fruit. The false dealing of priests and prophets is seen in the way that they handle the word of the Lord. They declare peace to the people of God when there is no peace.

Perhaps desiring the praise and the reward of men, they do not speak out against the sin of the people. They have lost the capacity to bring the law and the prophetic word of the Lord to bear critically upon their social condition. With the result that they are inured in their sin, utterly shameless in their rebellion and iniquity.

Verses 16 and 17 present us with two images of the Lord's challenge to his people. First of all, he calls them to go back to the ancient paths, the paths where the good way is. Presumably, this is a reference to the law itself.

The law is that which provides structure to Israel's life. It was the foundation of their society and in radically reconstituting the society of Judah upon it, they will find rest for their souls. They will find restoration.

But yet, when they hear the word of the Lord through the words of his prophets, they refuse it. We will not walk in it. The second image is that of watchmen, people warning of approaching danger, most particularly the prophets.

If the ancient paths are the law, the trumpet is the prophetic word. Yet as with the word of the law, they resist this. They will not pay attention.

The disaster that will come upon them will be the fruit of their own devices. The consequence, presumably the natural consequence of their course of life. In addition to all of the other things that they have done, they have perverted the worship of the Lord, transforming it into something that anesthetizes them from the injustice of their society.

With costly sacrifices and impressive but empty rituals, they have established a form of religion that is perfectly tailored for a rich, decadent and spiritually complacent society. Such a challenge to a culturally scrupulous, yet morally impure and socially oppressive society is common in the prophets. The Lord wants mercy, not sacrifice.

In Isaiah chapter 1 verses 12 to 17, we find another example of such a challenge. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you.

Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves.

Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil.

Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression.

Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. The practice of proper worship, though really important, is empty if not confirmed in actual practice.

Where this is forgotten, grand gestures and fine appearance in worship can become a replacement for the reality of a relationship with God. Beautiful buildings, grand liturgies, costly vestments, all of these things become worse than worthless if they are not accompanied by holiness of life, faithfulness to the Lord, and justice to the neighbour. In the absence of these, as in the case of Jerusalem, worship is so easily perverted into a complacency-producing mask upon the reality of a sick and evil society.

Once again, in verses 22 and 23, the approaching enemy is described, this people from the North Country. Their great power and irresistible might is like the sea that's approaching, about to sweep all before it. Hearing reports of this approaching army, Jerusalem will recognise that it is beyond hope.

They will be like a woman in labour, but not about to give birth. Indeed, they are called to mourn as for an only son. The one son that would have preserved the person's name and continued their legacy into the future has died and the future is closed with them.

The Lord put his word in the mouth of Jeremiah like fire, and now he is presented as the tester of metals among his people. Through him, the Lord will undertake a refining process through which the precious metal of a faithful people might hopefully emerge. Yet Jeremiah's task proves to be in vain.

It yields no positive fruit. The nation is discovered to be nothing but base metal, nothing but dross to be rejected by the Lord. A question to consider, how does Jeremiah's critique of the perversion of the worship of the Lord help us to recognise how the sinful performance of worship can end up as part of the structural support for evil within a society? Galatians chapter 6 For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour, for each will have to bear his own load. Let the one who has taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived.

God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit

will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, for they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers.

Amen. In Galatians chapter 6, Paul brings the argument of his epistle to a conclusion. He has just listed the fruit of the spirit in verses 22 to 23 of the preceding chapter.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. As John Berkeley observes, these fruit are given concrete form in the communal maxims that follow. Verses 1 to 10 discuss the shape that the life of the Christian community must take, and it is one marked by the fruit of the spirit throughout.

As Berkeley remarks, the fruit that springs from the spirit's life is here identified in the delicate negotiation of communal relations, in behavioral qualities fostered over time. The love that stands at their head is inherently social. If faith is operative in love, in 5 verse 6, it could never be reduced to an individual relationship to Christ.

The chapter begins with counsel for how to restore a sinning brother. It is addressed to those who are spiritual, to people who are living in the life of the spirit. Grace, gentleness and humility are the means by which this must be done.

We do not wield people's sins against them as means of building ourselves up, but gently and carefully reach out to them as fellow sinners. Having recognized and sought to remove the logs in our own eyes, we won't be inclined to vaunt ourselves over others, or to believe that we are above or immune to the pull of sin. So often we see the sins of others as fuel for our self-righteous superiority.

However, if we are spiritual, our desire will be the building up of the body of Christ, and the deliverance and restoration of the sinner. The flesh pits us against each other, each person living for his own sake and for his own advancement. The condemnation of the

law is a weapon that we can wield against each other, seeking to imprison our enemies in guilt and condemnation, so that we might gain social and moral advantage over them.

As Paul described it in the preceding chapter, this is biting and devouring each other, and those who practice this form of life will ultimately get consumed themselves. In a society of individuals competing against each other for honour, sin is an opportunity for competitive advantage, something to be seized upon, often in subtle ways. This perverse desire in us can even infect the way that harmful yet delicious gossip about others is shared under the guise of prayer points.

Bringing public dishonour upon others can burnish our reputation by comparison. Yet a spiritual community responds to such moments with grace and gentleness. They are especially vigilant at such times not to be trapped in the sin of pride, to which we can so easily fall prey at such moments.

Recognition of our own vulnerability to sin brings humility, which puts us in a better position to restore others. And the alternative to the competitive pursuit of honour is the willing adoption of the work of slaves. We bear one another's burdens.

This is the work of service, but not now of a class of slaves to their masters, but of each person to his neighbour. We are all to be slaves of each other in love, a reciprocal form of relationship where no person is ultimately placed over others. We all stand on the same level ground of grace, and everyone willingly places others before themselves.

In placing others before ourselves, we are simply following the law of Christ himself, for this is the way that our Master took with us. He is our Master, yet he ministered to us in love. In this way, our lives are lived according to the rule of Christ.

But this is also the way in which the moral purpose of the Torah is achieved. Adopting the way of service is informed by an honest self-appraisal, where we recognise that when it comes to the game of honour, we are all ultimately bankrupts. The game of honour is built around the projection of a false and inflated image of our righteousness in a competitive realm of mutual display, and we reject this way of boasting.

Yet we adopt a new boast. We boast in the cross of Christ, by which we have died to this world of competitive honour, with its biting and devouring of each other. We now boast in Christ, a boast proclaimed on the basis of our own bankruptcy.

Whether circumcision or uncircumcision, we have no status with God that is not ultimately founded upon completely unmerited grace in Christ. When we minister to others, we must always primarily test our own work. Paul knows that we can so easily take up a moral interest in others in order to deflect from our own moral responsibilities.

Ultimately we will all bear our own loads, as we have to give account of ourselves, not our neighbour, before God on the last day. We should not be so preoccupied with helping

out all of our neighbours with the moats in their eyes that we have not dealt with the logs in our own. Under the teaching of bearing one another's burdens, Paul gives the example of teachers and learners.

This is a classic asymmetric relationship, a hierarchical relationship that many would think of. However, Paul wants us to see how it too can be subject to this principle that breaks down the hierarchy. The teacher is not to place themselves over the learner, and the learner is to consider themselves and to act as a minister to those teaching them.

As they minister to those ministering to them, in prayer, encouragement, financial support, hospitality and all these other things, all stand together under the authority of Christ, in the mutual dependence of his body. We so easily see other people's gifts as threats to our own honour, but in the spirit we each employ our gifts for the service of our neighbours and so overcome the competitive struggle of honour that many labour under. Paul solemnly warns the Galatians against carelessness in their lives.

We either sow to the flesh or we sow to the spirit, and there will be harvests. God is not marked. Those who act according to the flesh will ultimately face the consequences and rewards of their way of life.

Those, for instance, who have given themselves to biting and devouring others will find that they too are consumed. However, those who sow to the spirit will end up reaping eternal life. The process of sowing to the spirit is one that takes self-control, takes patience and perseverance, yet sowing to the flesh comes quite naturally.

Life has its seasons of sowing, seasons where we are making decisions and developing habits and developing contacts and relationships that will have their consequences many years down the line. Then we have seasons of reaping, when we receive the consequences of the ways of life to which we have given ourselves. These can be periods of crisis, times when we realise the mistakes that we have made.

Such times tend to hit at particular seasons of people's lives. We talk about the midlife crisis, for instance. Recognising these times of harvest, we need to be careful what we are sowing.

For Paul, it is clear that eternal life will not be received apart from living in the spirit. We do not receive our standing with God on the basis of anything we are or anything we have done, yet our union with Christ, who alone is the basis of our standing with God, is lived out in the life of the spirit, and those who do not produce the spirit's fruit demonstrate that they have no part in him. It can be so easy to grow weary in doing good.

We see the wicked prosper, we see the wicked being honoured, while we can suffer and be shamed. Yet if we faithfully persevere, we can be assured of a reward, and the wicked

for their part will finally receive the harvest of their actions too. The Judaizers are concerned to make a good showing in the realm of competitive mutual display of the flesh.

They are very concerned to look good to the unbelieving Jews by downplaying the scandal of the cross, defining themselves primarily by Torah observance. Indeed, circumcising the Galatian Christians and bringing them over to the way of Torah observance as proselytes is a means by which they can look better to their unbelieving Jewish neighbours. See, we've made some converts! As Christians, it can be so easy to be trapped in the realm of the flesh ourselves, concerned to appear good to unbelievers, for whom we will use our fellow Christians as means to advance ourselves.

Perhaps we will broadcast and emphasise their sins to make us look good by comparison, or perhaps we will disown them, as the Judaizers might have disowned Paul in order to appear to be on the right side. Perhaps we will, like the Judaizers, fearfully go down the way of pursuing conformity with the cultural norms in order to downplay the scandal of the faith. Yet because of the cross of Christ, Paul has been crucified to this old world, this old world of mutual display, competitive honour, and seeking the approval of men.

Christ's crucifixion was the ultimate in a dishonourable death, a body stripped and beaten, spat upon and marked, hung, impotent and exposed on a wooden cross as a public shame. This is the absolute negation of the world of the flesh. Yet this is the badge of honour, it's the defining event for the Christian.

When Paul says that he bears in his body the marks of Jesus, he might be referring to the deep welts in his back from whips, the crooked gait of a man whose body has been battered by many cruelties, the signs of a person the world has spat out, much as it spat out his master at Calvary. For such a person what remains? Not the old structures of honour in the world of the flesh, things like circumcision and the competitive pursuit of social status and advantage and advancement over others, but a new creation. Paul pronounces a blessing upon everyone who has adopted this pattern of Christ, the way of life that is founded upon and defined by him, not by the works of the law, not by the status of the Torah, not by the honour that is given by men, but by the grace of God, an event that overcomes and nullifies all of these status and honour games that we play.

In giving this blessing he particularly mentions the Jews who have adopted this way of life, who have grounded their lives not in the honour given by Torah, in circumcision, or in the status that they have as an exclusive nation, but in the grace of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. They are the Israel of God. A question to consider.

How does the spirit reorient our attitude to doing good to others? How does this way of life differ from that lived in the flesh?