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David's sin concerning Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Final exhortations to the Philippians.

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

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Transcript

2 Samuel chapter 11. The daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him and he lay with her.

Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness. Then she returned to her house, and the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, I am pregnant. So David sent word to Joab, send me Uriah the Hittite.

And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab was doing, and how the people were doing, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, go down to your house and wash your feet.

And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, Uriah did not go down to his house,

David said to Uriah, have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house? Uriah said to David, the ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field.

Shall I then go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing. Then David said to Uriah, remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back. So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next.

And David invited him, and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he made him drunk. And in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

In the letter he wrote, set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down and die. And as Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant men. And the men of the city came out and fought with Joab, and some of the servants of David among the people fell.

Uriah the Hittite also died. Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting. And he instructed the messenger, When you have finished telling all the news about the fighting to the king, then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, Why did you go so near to the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? Who killed Abimelech the son of Jerubasheth? Did not a woman cast an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebes? Why did you go so near the wall? Then you shall say, Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.

So the messenger went and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. The messenger said to David, The men gained an advantage over us and came out against us in the field, but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall.

Some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also. David said to the messenger, Thus shall you say to Joab, Do not let this matter displease you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it, and encourage him.

When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. And when the morning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.

We've read the story of David's rise, and now in chapter 11 we've reached the point of

his catastrophic fall, a fall that will cast its ugly shadow over the rest of David's life. The story has its starting point in the war against the Ammonites. Joab and his men are besieging Rabba.

However, David has not gone out with the army, even though we have just been told that it was the time when kings go out to battle. The war with the Ammonites is important background to the story of chapters 11 and 12. It frames the entire narrative, which begins with David staying at home in Jerusalem, while his army goes out to besiege Rabba, and ends with the capture of Rabba, now with David present, and David then returning to Jerusalem.

In this chapter, the siege of Rabba will be exploited by David, as a means of covering up the murder of Uriah. The background of the battle heightens the irony, revealing just how cynical and evil David's sin was. David takes full advantage of the faithfulness, loyalty and honesty of his servant Uriah, in order to enact his callous betrayal, and his act of predation.

Rather than fighting for Israel with his men, David is staying at home, and praying upon the wife of one of his closest servants. While there was nothing wrong in principle with David not going out to war, when his behaviour is seen against the backdrop of the war, and in contrast with the behaviour of the ill-fated Uriah, it is seen in its true ugliness. Peter Lighthouse and others observed that the expression in the opening verse, typically translated, when kings go out to battle, is, in the Masoretic text, when messengers go out to battle.

The word for messengers being extremely close to that of kings. This would highlight just how much of the chapter is about the sending of messengers to and fro, not only in the kingly business of war, but in assisting David in his act of adultery and murder. Indeed, even when messengers are going to and from the battle line, it is the business of the adultery and murder that is foremost in David's mind, not the proper business of the Ammonite war.

David is lazing around in the late afternoon, lying on his couch. This detail is not strictly necessary to the scene, which might have begun with David on the roof of his palace. However, it helps to characterize David's state of excessive ease, which will contrast with Uriah's behavior later in the passage.

David sees a woman bathing from his roof. The king's palace was almost certainly on higher ground and a higher building than any of the other buildings around, so he was able to overlook other people's properties. According to many readings of the passage, Bathsheba was purifying herself from her presumably menstrual uncleanness, which suggests both that she was not pregnant and underlines the fact that she was acting as a righteous Israelite and was not inviting any male attention in her actions.

After David sees the woman, the first act of several acts of sending in the chapter occurs. David sends and inquires about the woman. In the various acts of sending, David establishes an expanding web of complicity.

He is told that she is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. One of the important things to note here is that both her father and her husband were members of David's 30 mighty men, listed at the end of 2 Samuel chapter 23. These were not just ordinary Israelites.

These were some of David's chief and most loyal men, the top 30. They performed the most remarkable deeds of heroism and faithfulness for him. Uriah the Hittite is a Hittite.

He is presumably not an Israelite but a convert. His piety is pronounced in the rest of the chapter. Preying upon a regular Israelite would be bad enough.

But David is preying upon one of Israel's great war heroes, upon a person whose loyalty to David and to the God of Israel was not merely a matter of honoring the loyalties of birth but were the loyalties that he had assumed through choice. The baseness of David's act of treachery is more readily seen in the light of this fact. Indeed, Bathsheba's grandfather, the father of Eliam, was Ahithophel, one of David's closest advisors and counselors.

When Ahithophel a few chapters later joined the conspiracy of Absalom, and even more so when he counseled Absalom openly to sleep with his father's concubines that David had left behind in the palace, on the very same roof from which David had espied Ahithophel's own granddaughter Bathsheba, he was probably getting some personal revenge. David's actions here will have huge repercussions down the line. We should also consider all of this from Bathsheba's perspective.

Here is the king, the most powerful man in the land, the man that her husband and her father fight for, the man whom her grandfather counsels, summoning her and wanting to lie with her. Not only is the power difference immense, she might also reasonably think that if she does not comply, David might take vengeance upon the people closest to her. She might also consider that, if she spoke out, she would be directly hurting people she loved and undermining the entire cause to which they had dedicated their lives and service.

Of course David is the one responsible, but you can see why she would feel trapped. Having discovered Bathsheba's identity, David sends messengers to take her. There is a sort of fall taking place here too.

David sees forbidden fruit, sees that it is pleasing to the eyes, and then takes it, bringing death and judgment upon himself. David to this point has, as it were, been established in the garden of the kingdom. God has shown immense goodness to him.

However, now that he falls into sin, it will lead to bitter consequences. After lying with Bathsheba, David sends her back to her house, but then she sends a message to David to declare that she is pregnant. We should be considering just how many messengers have already become privy to some part of this story.

This would likely have been the gossip of the servants at this point, an open secret in the palace. At this point David realises that his sin will likely become known, so he determines that he must get Uriah to lie with his wife, so that Uriah might perhaps think that the child, when it is born, is his. Under the guise of sending news about the war, David sends word to Joab to send him Uriah, who then sends him Uriah.

After speaking with Uriah, David sends him to his home and sends a gift after him. However, Uriah did not go back to his house, and this was told to David. We should again consider just how many people are becoming complicit in David's sin here.

Asked why he did not return to his house, Uriah gives an answer that highlighted David's detachment from his men in the war. Uriah is steadfastly loyal to the men, and even though his wife is just a short walk away, he is determined not to enjoy ease while the rest of the men are fighting. We should also consider the possibility that Uriah, by this point, has suspicions of his own.

Perhaps he wondered why David has sent for him in particular, or why David was so eager to speak to him, yet seemingly relatively uninterested in the news that he bore. Perhaps he noticed some servants whispering to each other when they saw him in the hall. To heighten the irony, David swears by David's own life that he will not return to his house and lie with his wife, while Joab and David's army are camping in the open field.

When David tries to get Uriah to lie with Bathsheba, he is trying to get him to break a vow that Uriah made on David's own life. That Uriah so values the life of the king, also makes us think of how little the king values the life of Uriah. On the third day, after David had tried and failed to get Uriah to go back to Bathsheba by getting him drunk, David sends Uriah with a message to Joab.

By this point, we've had over ten different acts of sending, message bearing, or news bringing of various kinds. Uriah, however, is sent with his own death warrant. The tragedy of Uriah and the sinfulness of David is seen by the fact that Uriah will die precisely on account of his loyalty and by means of his faithfulness in bearing a message from his master.

David is also making Joab most directly complicit in his sin. Joab was the man of violence who had already proved his willingness to act in an immoral way for personal vengeance or political expediency. David knows all too well that in Joab he has a man who will get what he wants to have done done.

David's plan is a really careless one. The plan would involve making a great many more people complicit in a way that could easily lead to its failure. David, the great military strategist, is becoming careless and sloppy and foolish on account of his sin.

Like many others before and after him, in David, sin reduced a wise man to folly. According to David's plan, the men around Uriah would have to be in on the plan in order to draw back from him. Presumably seeing its weakness, Joab doesn't follow David's plan.

Rather, he determines to treat some other soldiers as collateral damage so that they die alongside Uriah in a place where the fighting is especially fierce. In murdering Uriah, David also murders a number of other nameless servants of his. Knowing that the military manoeuvre in which Uriah perished was quite unnecessary and obviously strategically flawed, David knows that David will be very angry about it, so he instructs the messenger to tell David that Uriah died in it, knowing that that would appease his anger.

However, the messenger now probably has his own suspicions that the king and the commander of his army have conspired to assassinate an Israelite war hero. The extensive details given by Joab are also interesting, especially the reference to Abimelech. Abimelech was a murderous king who was killed by a woman in Judges chapter 9. Perhaps Joab is making a veiled comment upon David's sin.

David was now also a brother-murdering king who risked having his head crushed by a woman. The messenger, however, seems to relay a somewhat different message from that which he was instructed to. In both the actions of Joab, which didn't directly follow the instructions that he was given, and Joab's messenger, who didn't give the precise message that he was sent to give, we see how David's sin has compromised the effectiveness of his rule.

The dishonour of his own actions end up feeding the dishonesty and even the treachery of his own servants. Through the betrayal and murder of Uriah, a profoundly faithful servant, David became more dependent upon and beholden to those of his servants who were most willing to be complicit in such an action. The very servants who would be most likely to betray him in their turn, as Joab later would.

Joab, knowing David's sin, now also had greater power over him and secured his own position, making it harder for David to purge his administration of Joab's poison, something he should have done long ago. David's response to the news of Uriah's death, especially when we contrast it to his response to the news of the deaths of people such as Saul and Jonathan, Abner or Ish-bosheth, displays a callous cynicism that might even make us retrospectively start to doubt his sincerity in those instances. After the death of her husband Uriah, Bathsheba mourns him, and after her mourning is over, the coast is now clear and David takes her as his wife, and she bears him a son.

It might seem as if David had gotten away with it, but the final words of the chapter alert us to the Lord's displeasure and prepare us for his judgement upon David that will follow. A question to consider. Reading this chapter, we can see David's initial sin of coveting his neighbour's wife gradually grow into ever greater sins and folly, and the slow spread of its rot into his power to rule, his judgement, the loyalty and faithfulness of his servants, his reputation among his people, and much more.

The consequences of David's sin would only increase over time. How, after considering the growth of the sin and the spread of its rot, could David have arrested or avoided his sin? What steps could he have taken long before he stepped out on that roof, or after he saw Bathsheba, or at some subsequent point, that would have avoided the sin or prevented its growth? Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice.

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.

I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of facing plenty in hunger, abundance in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble, and you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

I have received full payment and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Greet every saint in Christ

Jesus.

The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philippians chapter 4, the conclusion of this epistle, begins by returning to themes from earlier in the letter. Paul had begun his treatment of appropriate Christian behaviour in chapter 1 verses 27-28 with the following charge. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

Now, in the first verse of this chapter, he returns to the charge to stand firm in the Lord in the manner that he has described, summing up the main body of the letter. Paul describes the Philippians as those whom he loves and longs for, his joy and his crown. Paul's heart is knit to the Philippians.

When Paul speaks about the people to whom he ministers, it is very clear that he relates to them in an intense and intimate manner. He regards them as his children. He yearns for their growth in the Lord.

He constantly prays for them. He experiences anguish or deep sorrow at news of their sins or failings. He rejoices to hear of the prospering of God's truth among them.

Paul is no mere teacher of an ideology or religious system or philosophy. He is like a mother bearing children. He is concerned above all to see their health and their growth.

He rejoices and boasts over their growth, like a grandmother might speak of her young grandchildren's milestones, taking the greatest of vicarious delight in their well-being. It seems as if there are two women in the church who were at odds with each other, Euodia and Syntyche. Paul speaks of them gently.

They have both served the gospel with Paul and his fellow workers, and are to be honoured for their labours. He addresses each of them personally, entreating them to settle their differences and agree in the Lord. Their lack of agreement was presumably causing problems in the church, where they were prominent and important members.

He also addresses a particular person, referred to as his true or loyal companion, to help the two of them to settle their differences and to pursue their ministries in the church. Who is the loyal companion? From the grammar we know that it is a man, but his identity is not clearly specified. Most likely it was Epaphroditus who was bearing the letter, was also referred to within it, and would be present when it was read.

Rather than rebuking the women, Paul appeals to and exhorts them. And he asks Epaphroditus not to discipline them, but to help them, to reconcile and presumably also

more generally, honouring them on account of their previous labours. Their names are in the Book of Life, a fact that, when considered, will encourage Epaphroditus to treat them appropriately, as a help to them in their growth to godliness.

Once again Paul calls the Philippians to rejoice. This is an exhortation to which he has returned on a number of key occasions in the letter. He began by speaking of the way that he himself rejoiced in his circumstances.

Then he summoned the Philippians to join him and, in chapter 3 verse 1, called them to rejoice in the Lord. He wants their gentleness or reasonableness to be known to everyone. As Christians, they should be known for their meekness.

Everyone around should see their kindness and their forbearance with others. The Lord is near, both near to all who call upon him and near in the sense of the imminence of his judgment. The Philippians should not be marked by anxiety, but should bring their concerns to the Lord in prayer.

Just as their gentleness should be made known to everyone, their needs should be made known to the Lord. The result of their following these instructions would be a state of peace, a peace that comes from God himself and which cannot be accounted for by any merely human explanation. Such a peace would guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Christ can still the stormy waters of our hearts and minds. When others around us are stirred up by anger, resentment, antagonisms and tensions, fear and anxiety, we can know the calm that enables us to think clearly and to act wisely. Paul is very clear about where such peace comes from.

It comes from turning our attention to God in prayer and thanksgiving, from learning to rejoice and practicing gentleness with our neighbours. It comes from God's work within us. The resulting peace guards our hearts and minds in situations of conflict.

When there is conflict and trouble without, it is this peace that reigns within. Our hearts and minds will be protected from being caught up in all of this strife. We will be able to think and act with wisdom and grace.

When others are losing their composure, their wits or their clarity of mind. This section concerned with rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving, focuses upon key elements of worship and piety. In verses 8-9 however, Paul's attention turns to virtues that were more generally recognised among the pagans, as commentators such as Gordon Fee and Mournner Hooker have noted.

He takes the language of Hellenistic moralism but situates it within a very different frame, one established by the Christian gospel. The expressions that he uses here are common in Greco-Roman moral thought, but very unusual in Paul. Paul has earlier

revealed a stark contrast between a Greco-Roman moral vision and the gospel, but now he shows the way that the gospel allows us to appropriate some of the riches of the Greeks and Romans.

Fee argues that the words translated, think about these things, would be better translated as, take into account these things. Paul's point is not so much to think on higher things, but as those who are living in two worlds, and as those who have counted as lost things that formerly gave them a sense of their worthiness, and things which they highly valued, the Philippian Christians should carefully assess their heritage. Rather than completely writing off their Greco-Roman heritage, they ought to evaluate it more closely according to the gospel, and the criteria that Paul here enumerates, each of which must be considered in the light of the gospel itself.

In the radical reassessment to which he has called them, they should not jettison everything. Paul's criteria are as follows. This is perhaps the most surprising of the criteria.

It probably has to do with those things that properly excite our love and admiration, things that are beautiful, delightful, and admirable. This isn't an essentially moral criterion, suggesting that it is good and appropriate for us to find things in God's world pleasing, and a sort of faith that would abandon such things is not healthy. Christians should enjoy good music, for instance, not just for some moral end, but simply because it is good music.

Whatever is admirable, again, whatever rightly wins people's praise and admiration. Paul elaborates these two criteria a little by speaking of things that have excellence, or are worthy of praise. Paul had not just taught the Philippians in such matters, he had also presented himself as a worked example to them, as he had practiced these things in his own life.

They should practice these things, and they would know the presence of the God of peace with them. Paul had received a gift of support from the Philippians through Epaphroditus, something that would presumably have meant a very great deal to him while in prison, and now he expresses his rejoicing in the Lord on receiving it. However, the nature of Paul's thanksgiving is surprising.

Rather than directly thanking the Philippians, he rejoices in the Lord for the new expression of their concern for him. Then he downplays his need. He has learned to be content in whatever situation he finds himself in.

He has been given such a sense of sufficiency by God himself, who provides him with the strength that he needs, a strength sufficient to whatever situation he finds himself in. He emphasizes the generous participation of the Philippians in his ministry, not just in their most recent gift, but in the past. Their most recent gift was a renewed reminder of a

partnership that he shared with them over many years.

Again, Paul's response to the Philippians' gift is surprising. He explicitly declares that he does not seek the gift, but rather the fruit that increases to the Philippians' own credit. Rather than expressing his thanks directly to them and claiming that he is in their debt, as most people would do, he declares that God will supply their every need.

As Peter Lighthouse observes in his book *Gratitude and Intellectual History*, the Christian approach to gratitude is profoundly subversive, especially within patronage cultures, where political and social advancement and dominance arise in large measure through unilateral impositions of obligation and the gaining of honour by means of gift-giving. Within the first century world, the New Testament's teaching concerning gift-giving and reception was a threatening one, not least in how persistent it was in directing thanksgiving to God above all others. This determined rendering of thanks to God undermined the leverage of the powerfully obliging reciprocities that dominated social life and the hierarchies that they produced and sustained.

It made possible the ingratitude of departing from tradition, of leaving father and mother to follow Christ, and of reneging on the imposed social debts by which patrons and powerful benefactors secured their social power. By firmly directing gratitude to God, it resisted the supposed entitlement of the wealthy to employ God's gifts to them as means of accruing power by imposing debts upon others. The new form of gift economy established by Christ and the Apostles led to the eschewing of honour competitions, to releasing others from debt, and to the replacement of the vicious asymmetries of hierarchical patron-client gift relations with relations of mutual patronage.

Lighthouse remarks upon the Apostle Paul's practice of thanksgiving in his letters, the manner in which it demonstrates the distinctive character of resolutely God-directed gratitude. Paul's expressions of thanksgiving in his letters, he observes, are offered almost exclusively to God alone, and Paul offers such thanks for benefits received by others no less than for those he has received himself. Perhaps most startling to his contemporaries' ears would be the way in which he responded to gifts given to him, not least when he expresses his appreciation for the support of the Philippians in this chapter.

When he says, I thank my God for your remembrance of me, in reference to their support of him in his ministry, Lighthouse remarks, Paul doesn't employ the language or perform the cultural courtesies associated with indebtedness. Rather than placing Paul in the Philippians' debt, their gift is a token of their communion with him in his gospel ministry. Paul nowhere expresses an expectation or obligation on his part to repay them, but he directs their attention to God, their common benefactor, who acts as the guarantor of any debt that his servant Paul might incur, and my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Lightheart writes again, In the community of Jesus the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed for, rather than to, benefactors. Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers.

They do not owe return payment. Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries. They cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients.

The Church's continual practice of thanksgiving cultivates a well-directed sense of gratitude, which has liberating political potential. When we repeatedly recognize and honor our great divine benefactor as the ultimate generous giver of every good and perfect gift, whatever hands we may have received them from, the power of lesser benefactors to wield control over us by their gifts is considerably weakened, as they can no longer command the sort of gratitude and obligations that belong to God alone. The economy of gifts ceases to be an engine of hierarchy and social inequality when our thanks and obligation for all gifts is ultimately seen to belong to God alone.

All others are, at best, channels of and participants in God's act of giving. Furthermore, when God is understood to be the guarantor of debts, giving to the poor can be regarded as a matter of lending to the Lord, as we see in Proverbs 19, verse 17. Rather than placing the recipients of charity in a relationship of indebtedness to the givers, it frees both to engage in the transaction.

Trusting that repayment would be provided by a third party. As John Barclay suggests, the conviction that God would repay those who gave to the poor was complemented by the agency afforded to the recipient of charity in blessing the giver, or seeking recompense against the uncharitable, a principle that we see in Deuteronomy 24, verses 13-15. In such a manner, the hierarchy of the cultural form of patronage was replaced by a mutual patronage, one reinforced by the Christian teaching that the one gift of the Spirit was represented in the many spiritual gifts of the members of the body of Christ.

Such a practice of gift can produce the loving unity that Paul calls for, disarming the logic that drives antagonism and hostile competition. In verse 20, Paul concludes the section with a doxology, directing all towards God's glory. And the epistle ends with greetings.

Paul wants his greetings in Christ Jesus to be conveyed to every Christian in Philippi. The brothers with him, presumably his fellow workers, greet them. Also the wider body of Christians there, especially those in Caesar's household, presumably various servants and officials, extended their greetings.

The reference to Caesar's household lends support to the idea that Paul is in prison in Rome. Finally, he invokes the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, desiring that it might be with their spirit. A question to consider.

How might we practically go about applying Paul's criteria to certain aspects of our own

culture?