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February 14th: Jeremiah 44 & 2 Corinthians 12:1-13

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Final judgment upon the Egyptian exiles. Caught up to paradise and a thorn in the flesh.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 44. The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the Judeans who lived in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, at Tappanese, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You have seen all the disaster that I brought upon Jerusalem and upon all the cities of Judah.

Behold, this day they are a desolation, and no one dwells in them because of the evil that they committed, provoking me to anger, in that they went to make offerings and serve other gods that they knew not, neither they nor you nor your fathers. Yet I persistently sent to you all my servants the prophets, saying, O do not do this abomination that I hate. But they did not listen or incline their ear to turn from their evil and make no offerings to other gods.

Therefore my wrath and my anger were poured out and kindled in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, and they became a waste and a desolation as at this day.

And now thus says the Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, Why do you commit this great evil against yourselves, to cut off from you man and woman, infant and child, from the midst of Judah, leaving you no remnant? Why do you provoke me to anger with the works of your hands, making offerings to other gods in the land of Egypt where you have come to live, so that you may be cut off and become a curse and a taunt among all the nations of the earth? Have you forgotten the evil of your fathers, the evil of the kings of Judah, the evil of their wives, your own evil, and the evil of your wives, which they committed in the land of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? They have not humbled themselves even to this day, nor have they feared, nor walked in my law and my statutes that I set before you and before your fathers. Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will set my face against you for harm, to cut off all Judah.

I will take the remnant of Judah who have set their faces to come to the land of Egypt to live, and they shall all be consumed. In the land of Egypt they shall fall, by the sword and by famine they shall be consumed. From the least to the greatest they shall die by the sword and by famine, and they shall become an oath, a horror, a curse, and a taunt.

I will punish those who dwell in the land of Egypt, as I have punished Jerusalem with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, so that none of the remnant of Judah who have come to live in the land of Egypt shall escape or survive or return to the land of Judah, to which they desire to return to dwell there. For they shall not return, except some fugitives. Then all the men who knew that their wives had made offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answer Jeremiah.

As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you, but we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. But since we left off making offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything, and have been consumed by the sword and by famine.

And the women said, When we made offerings to the Queen of Heaven, and poured out drink offerings to her, was it without our husband's approval that we made cakes for her bearing her image, and poured out drink offerings to her? Then Jeremiah said to all the people, men and women, all the people who had given him this answer, As for the offerings that you offered in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, you and your fathers, your kings and your officials, and the people of the land, did not the Lord remember them? Did it not come into his mind? The Lord could no longer bear your evil deeds, and the abominations that you committed. Therefore your land has become a desolation, and a waste, and a curse, without inhabitant, as it is this day. It is because

you made offerings, and because you sinned against the Lord, and did not obey the voice of the Lord, or walk in his law, and in his statutes, and in his testimonies, that this disaster has happened to you, as at this day.

Jeremiah said to all the people, and all the women, Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah, who are in the land of Egypt. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, You and your wives have declared with your mouths, and have fulfilled it with your hands, saying, We will surely perform our vows that we have made, to make offerings to the Queen of heaven, and to pour out drink-offerings to her. Then confirm your vows, and perform your vows.

Therefore hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah, who dwell in the land of Egypt. Behold, I have sworn by my great name, says the Lord, that my name shall no more be invoked by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, As the Lord God lives. Behold, I am watching over them for disaster, and not for good.

All the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine until there is an end of them. And those who escape the sword shall return from the land of Egypt to the land of Judah, few in number. And all the remnant of Judah who came to the land of Egypt to live shall know whose word will stand, mine or theirs.

This shall be the sign to you, declares the Lord, that I will punish you in this place, in order that you may know that my words will surely stand against you for harm. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will give Pharaoh Hophra king of Egypt into the hand of his enemies, and into the hand of those who seek his life, as I gave Zedekiah king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, who was his enemy and sought his life. In Jeremiah chapter 43, against the word of the Lord through the prophet, Johanan and the rest of the Judahite company that survived the destruction of Jerusalem and the insurrection of Ishmael the son of Nethaniah against Gedaliah had travelled down to the land of Egypt and had settled at Tapanes.

Jeremiah and Baruch were brought down with them. And now in chapter 44, Jeremiah in Egypt, in his last known words, addresses the company of the people. Prior to the arrival of Johanan and his company in Egypt, there already seemed to have been Jews who have taken refuge in the land.

In Jeremiah chapter 24 verse 8 we read of some of these. But thus says the Lord, Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. Beyond Tapanes, which is near the modern day Suez Canal, Migdal is north and east of Tapanes.

It was another town on the frontier of Egypt. Another of the contingent of the Jews to which Jeremiah's prophecy is addressed are found in the land of Pathros. The people of

Pathros are mentioned in Genesis chapter 10 verse 14 in the Table of Nations.

They live in Upper Egypt, which is the south of the country, Lower Egypt is in the north, and Memphis is the capital of that part of the land. The Lord tells them to recall the disaster that came upon Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem was on account of the evil that they performed, most particularly the idolatry that they gave themselves over to.

Time and again the Lord sent his prophets to them, challenging them and calling them to change their ways, but they stubbornly refused to do so. Their persistence in idolatry and their other practices led to the destruction of Jerusalem. The Lord had warned them of such a fate back in Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 17 to 20.

Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and they pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke? declares the Lord. Is it not themselves to their own shame? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold my anger and my wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground.

It will burn and not be quenched. If they looked at Jerusalem now, they would only find a waste and a desolation. The Lord's word had been fulfilled, and yet they had not learned the lesson.

All that they are doing now is provoking the Lord even further to anger, bringing down even worse judgement upon themselves. They had already rejected the word of the Lord in going down to Egypt. They had already brought themselves to a position of even more devastating judgement, and now they are going to pile on top of this further abominations of idolatry.

As they behave in such a manner, they are inviting the Lord's judgement, and the result of this will be that they will become a curse and a taunt among all the nations. They have failed to learn from the destruction of Jerusalem, and they have failed to learn from the evils of their fathers and what came upon them. The Lord here mentions their fathers, the kings of Judah, the wives of the kings, the current people themselves, and then their wives also.

The distinction of men and their wives is probably noteworthy in this particular context, as the worship being performed is for the Queen of Heaven. The sort of worship in question is gendered. There is a family dynamic involved, as we saw in Jeremiah 7 18.

The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven. The interplay of men and women in such idolatrous

worship is also seen in the example of Solomon in 1 Kings 11 4-8. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.

For Solomon went after Ashtoreth, the god of the Sidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Molech, the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem.

And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods. The importance of kings' wives as an impetus towards idolatry is also seen in the character of Jezebel, who very much plays a role in sponsoring the worship of Baal and Ashtoreth. The negative influence of the wives of the kings can be seen in the fact that they often come from surrounding nations.

The kings of Judah and Israel would marry foreign women as a way of forming treaties with the surrounding nations, to oblige their new wives and to strengthen the relationship between nations. They would have adopted and supported and established the cults of foreign gods in the land of Israel. The Lord had explicitly warned about the dangers of intermarriage in the covenant, a danger that was particularly keen for the kings.

Beyond the kings, however, there seemed to be a dynamic that afflicted all of the people. In this chapter, it is particularly the women who seem to be instigating the worship, and the men who are supporting them. The people had consistently failed to humble themselves, to obey the word of the Lord and to walk in his law.

As a result, the Lord would set his face against them. He would cut off the entirety of Judah. The land of Egypt would become the grave of the exiled company.

The familiar triad returns here. They will die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. The punishment that fell upon the land would also come upon Egypt.

No one who fled to Egypt would escape it, and only the smallest remnant would be left. The judgment that came upon them would be such a signal one, that they would become an oath, a horror, a curse and a taunt. This same judgment had been spoken of earlier in Jeremiah chapter 42 verse 17.

All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them. Here, however, the possibility of a few escaping is raised.

The people refuse to listen to Jeremiah. They stubbornly persist in their ways. Indeed, they double down on their position.

They have made vows to the Queen of Heaven, and they have every intention to carry through with them. It might come as a shock to the hearer of the book of Jeremiah that a strikingly different interpretation of the story of Judah is possible. And yet, even after all of their recent history, the people here have a very different understanding of how things came about.

They look back to the good old days under Manasseh, before the reforms of Josiah. In those good old days, everything was going well for them, until Josiah came along and his reforms led to one disaster after another. As soon as they gave up their idolatrous worship, they became the prey of all of their enemies.

Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho. Pharaoh Necho then removed Jehoahaz. Jehoiachin was taken by Nebuchadnezzar, and then Zedekiah was taken by him too, all after they had abandoned the proper worship of the Queen of Heaven.

The Queen of Heaven is Ashtoreth, also associated with Ishtar of the Babylonians. The worship of the Queen of Heaven described here seems to be similar in character to that that is mentioned back in chapter 7 of the book. The women are the primary worshippers, but they have the complete support and approval of their husbands.

The prophet responds by presenting what the book of Jeremiah throughout has given as the orthodox reading of Judah's history. The Lord has seen their evil deeds, he has seen their false worship, he has seen their idolatrous practice. It is on account of this that judgment has come upon them.

Far from being the good old days, the days of Manasseh were the days that sealed the fate of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom. Jeremiah declares the word of the Lord to them. They have made their vows, and now they have expressed their commitment to carrying them through, in which case they should go right ahead.

If they have so stubbornly chosen the course of death, let them stick to it. But the Lord has a word for them. The land of their chosen exile is going to be a land devoid of true worship.

The name of the Lord will be silenced in the land. As they have stuck to their idolatrous vows, so he is going to make this vow. They will be utterly consumed and will come to an end.

In that day the two vows that have been made will be tested. Which will stand? The word that they have made to commit themselves to the Queen of Heaven, or the word that the Lord has made to blot them out. The Lord declares that he is watching over his word.

He is watching over them for disaster and not for good. We have similar language to this in Jeremiah chapter 31 verse 28. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy and bring harm, so I will watch

over them to build and to plant, declares the Lord.

All of this draws our mind back to Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11-12 in the call of Jeremiah where the Lord grants Jeremiah his first vision. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.

In the final years of the kingdom, King Zedekiah had made an ill-advised treaty with Pharaoh Hophra of Egypt. The chapter ends by comparing the fate that awaits Pharaoh Hophra with the fate that befell Zedekiah. Pharaoh Hophra too will be given into the hand of his enemies.

A question to consider, the fate of the community of exiles in Egypt is that of being finally erased from the story of God's people. There is no root of redemption left for them, only the certain awaiting of judgment. What lessons might we learn from their cautionary example? 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 1-13 I must go on boasting, though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter? On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth, but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, for when I am weak, then I am strong. I have been a fool, you forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you, for I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works, for in what were you less favoured than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul continues his fool's speech, in which he has adopted a persona in order to beat the so-called super-apostles at their own game. Throughout, he

has made sure to hold this persona at arm's length, ensuring that the Corinthians recognise that he isn't speaking as himself at this point.

While engaging in boasting as a fool, Paul has cleverly subverted the boasting of the super-apostles, boasting about the greater sufferings and indignities he has suffered for Christ, things that wouldn't be a cause of boasting for almost anyone else. He has shown that he can best the super-apostles in cause for boasting, while also showing that their supposed grounds for boasting are not the true grounds for boasting at all. Now he takes this further, to a dangerous point, where he might risk tipping over into actual boasting, as it is harder to establish a clear distance between himself and his fool's speech at this juncture.

While Paul is showing that the grounds of the super-apostles' boasting is illegitimate, he is also showing that, if he were a fool, he could outmatch them in such boasting. Paul doesn't avoid such boasting out of fear of losing, but because the boasting is incompatible with Christ. Having listed a great number of hardships, Paul moves to speak of astonishing degrees of revelation.

The super-apostles might boast of their visions, but Paul's visions and revelations greatly exceed theirs. Speaking of these visions more directly in his fool's speech would be unfitting, and would easily seem like actual boasting. So Paul chooses to relate the vision that he received in the third person, speaking of a man in Christ, while clearly relating his own personal experiences.

This actually happened to Paul, and was a clear sign of the great blessing that he received, one that was manifestly far greater than that enjoyed by others. He needs to speak of this with great trepidation, though, because whether or not he intended it as a boast, it would have the same effect, and would undermine the critique of boasting that he is advancing here. Paul doesn't go into details about the experience.

He casts a veil over much of it. He speaks of himself in the third person. He doesn't know whether he was in the body or out of it, and he heard things that can't be told.

Paul is mostly intentionally tipping his hand here to reveal cards that he would never actually play, encouraging all of his opponents to fold. He has presumably revealed nothing of this event to the Corinthians prior to this time. This would have strengthened Paul's point that such boasting was incompatible with faithful Christian service.

In all of his time of knowing them, he hadn't mentioned this remarkable vision, precisely because such a vision could only properly be received by a profoundly humble person. We should probably recall Numbers 12 1-8 here, where Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses, insinuating that Moses' prominence as the prophetic leader of the Israelites was ego-driven. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman, and they said, Has the Lord indeed

spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also? And the Lord heard it.

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who are on the face of the earth. And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting. And the three of them came out.

And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both came forward. And he said, Hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth clearly and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Moses was the one to whom God revealed himself most fully. He was the faithful and most trusted servant. Moses' humility may be related to the intensity of the revelation that God gave to him and the intimacy that he enjoyed with the Lord.

Extensive revelation, power or authority are huge liabilities and can easily corrupt people. Moses' extreme humility is that which fits him to be the recipient of a unique level of revelation. If he was not the meekest man on the earth, he would not be suited to have the greatest degree of revelation in the earth.

If, for a moment, Moses had thought that the exceptional degree of revelation he had received was about him, he would be in extreme peril of pride. It was because Moses was the meekest of all men that the Lord could reveal himself so fully to him without puffing him up. Paul doesn't actually express this vision in the form of a boast.

He just relates the story as one that he would be able to make a boast about, should he want to do so. Yet, after tipping his hand, he doesn't play any card. Rather, he puts the cards he has been playing with in his fool's speech down and starts to dismantle the logic of the boasting.

He concludes verse 6 by declaring that he refrains from such boasting altogether. He doesn't build his apostolic credentials upon the basis of special revelations and visions, but upon things that the Corinthians had seen in him and heard from him. From his astonishing heavenly vision, Paul moves to speak of a thorn in the flesh that the Lord had given to him, to ensure that he didn't become conceited.

This was given by God, but is also described as a messenger of Satan designed to harass him. There has been much speculation concerning the character of this thorn in the flesh. What exactly is it? The word thorn might refer to a stake upon which someone might become impaled on a battlefield.

It seems to be a stratagem designed by Satan to undermine Paul's ministry. It is both a messenger of Satan, but also something that God permits and wills Paul to suffer in his gracious providence. Like Job in the Old Testament, Paul is someone that Satan has his eye on, and whom he wishes to destroy.

By allowing Paul to undergo the testing of Satan, God proves the effectiveness of his work in him. It is probably best not to engage in too much speculation about what this thorn might have been. Some have suggested loss of eyesight, others epilepsy, others severe headaches or something like that.

We should assume that it was some affliction, rather than a sinful temptation. A sinful temptation would undermine Paul's point here. Rather, it is likely similar to the things that Job suffered in Satan's attack upon his body.

External hardships and afflictions hadn't done the trick with Paul for Satan, as they had also failed with Job, so Satan struck closer to home. The actual thing that was the thorn in the flesh isn't the real point. The issue is what Paul learned through it.

While the super-apostles seem to have emphasised their victories, their revelations, their strengths and their riches, Paul had discovered God's grace and power in the place of his greatest weakness and suffering. At that point, God was fashioning him to be a fitting bearer of his power, by emptying him of all of his own. He prayed three times for the removal of the thorn in the flesh.

We should probably remember Christ's own threefold prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, that the cup would pass from him, before surrendering himself to the Father's will. Paul is probably conscious of this parallel. He is sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Paul has learned contentment in the sufficiency of God in his weakness. God's grace is enough. And this is all for the sake of Christ, in whose sufferings he is ultimately sharing.

Paul wraps up his fool's discourse. The Corinthians should have known that Paul was the genuine article. He shouldn't have needed to play the part of the fool to show the Corinthians that he has the marks of a true apostle, and that he is by no means less than the supposed super-apostles.

The fruits of his genuine ministry were amply manifested among them, and even in them. They themselves were epistles of Christ, ministered by Paul and his associates. He had patiently proved himself to them in his ministry among them.

Nor had Paul treated the Corinthians any less than any other church. The one exception to this is what they have come to imagine as a wrong done to them in his not taking support from them. Paul's response to this at the end of verse 13 is suitably sarcastic.

A question to consider. Paul presents his thorn in the flesh as the necessary companion to the wonderful revelations that he received. What are some other biblical examples of God humbling people in order that they might be more powerfully used by him?