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November 14th: Psalm 37:1-17 & Acts 15:22-35

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Do not fret because of evildoers. The letter of the Jerusalem Council.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 37 verses 1-17. Of David. Fret not yourself because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.

Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him and he will act.

He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices.

Refrain from anger and forsake wrath, fret not yourself, it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked will be no more, though you look carefully at his place he will not

be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming. The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose way is upright.

Their sword shall enter their own heart and their bows shall be broken. Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked. For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous.

The thirty-seventh psalm could be seen as a reflection upon the truth described in the third beatitude in Matthew chapter 5 verse 5. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Faced with the seeming prospering of the wicked, the righteous person is encouraged not to fret but to trust in the Lord, confident the wicked will pass away and the faithful will finally receive the fullness of blessing. The psalm is an acrostic, with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in succession beginning a set of double verses, although our versification of the text doesn't follow the literary structure of the text itself all of the way through.

The acrostic structure both aids memorization and gives a sense of the completeness of the message that is contained within. The opening words, fret not yourself, are repeated in verses 7 and 8. They provide a fundamental note to which the psalm will return at various points. The righteous person, seeing how well evil persons are doing, how their businesses are thriving, how their influence is growing, how their endeavors are succeeding, might be tempted to be envious.

The initial response might be frustration on their account, but the poetic parallelism shows how this could easily pass into the more dangerous feelings of envy towards them. The righteous person can fall into the trap of being so disheartened at and frustrated by the success of the wicked that he turns to wish that he were in their position. But the psalmist encourages them to hold their ground.

The end of the wicked will come. The commandment not to fret is not left alone but is attended by a reason in order to encourage us to its observance. The wicked will pass away with all of their works.

A similar point is made in Proverbs 24 verses 19-20 in very similar language. Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked. For the evil man has no future, the lamp of the wicked will be put out.

The presence of this wisdom principle here might illustrate the way that the Book of the Psalms contains material associated with many different parts of scripture, transposed as it were by the spirit into the form of song, so that the truths of the scripture might be

a lively word within us, settled in our memories and our mouths for the end of our better meditation, not just a word on pages outside of us. Martin Luther wrote of the Book of the Psalms, with almost the whole sum comprehended in one little book. The Psalter is the very paragon of books.

The more that we focus on those around us, the more discouraged and disheartened we can be. Our lives will be lived in constant comparisons in the present, and we will always be frustrated and distracted. We must not allow ourselves to become preoccupied with the wicked, but must keep our eyes upon the Lord and seek his approval.

Rather than obsess about how the wicked are doing, David encourages us to devote ourselves to three alternative courses of action. We must first of all think in terms of the longer term picture. Rather than focusing on the present, we should recognise that the wicked will pass away, and that the faithful will be vindicated.

Secondly, we must focus our attention on the Lord instead, and be unmindful of the wicked. We must trust in the Lord, depending upon and looking to him and his promises. We must delight ourselves in the Lord, dwelling upon his goodness.

The more that we do this, the less appealing the lot of the wicked will appear. In addition to trusting the Lord and delighting in the Lord, we must commit ourselves to the Lord, both in the path that we take and in our reputation. This is a matter of unburdening ourselves of the worry, anxiety and tensions that will build up within us when we are preoccupied with the wicked.

The Lord will finally vindicate us. Thirdly, we must be proactive in our behaviour. David exhorts us to do good, to dwell in the land and to befriend faithfulness.

We must live in a disciplined, devoted and focused manner, looking to the Lord, not focusing on the people around us, undistracted by the others and how they are doing. We know that the immediate present is a distorted view of how things will finally work out. In the end to which we are looking, many who are now exalted will be brought low, and many who are low will be exalted.

Rather than fretting or living by wrath and anger, David encourages us to be still before the Lord and to wait patiently for Him. We don't need to assume the burden of our own vindication or our own final prospering. We can unburden ourselves of that, giving that to the Lord as we wait upon Him.

It is premature to judge the blessedness of the wicked and the righteous now. The time will come when a sharp differentiation will be made between them. However people seem to be doing now, the righteous will one day inherit the land, while the wicked will be wiped off it, no sign of the wicked having been there remaining.

The meek, the very people we might think have no chance of coming out on top in the

struggle of history, will be the ones who inherit the land, and they will enjoy great peace within it. The meek are those who, rather than fretting, commit themselves, their way and their vindication to the Lord, and waiting patiently for Him, live faithfully in the present. The wicked man, for his part, is driven by his antagonism with the righteous, against whom he plots and seethes.

However the Lord is a bulwark against such men. He laughs at them, because their doom is fixed and they cannot avoid their inevitable reckoning. All of their schemes will ultimately come back upon their own heads, and their power will be crushed.

In light of all of this, whatever the appearances of the situation might be, the poor righteous person is in a far better position than that enjoyed in the collective wealth of many wicked men. Their power will soon be crushed, but the power of the righteous is the Lord. A question to consider, what resonance would this psalm have had at the time when Jesus referenced it in the Beatitudes? Acts chapter 15 verses 22-35 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them, and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They sent Judas called Bar-Sabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter. The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia. Greetings.

Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. After the Jerusalem council in Acts chapter 15, the council writes a letter communicating their judgment and emissaries are appointed to bear it to

Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The letter largely repeats the statements made by James at the conclusion of the council's deliberations.

The apostles and elders of Jerusalem want to appoint some representatives of Jerusalem to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. We should recall that Barnabas himself had initially been a representative of the Jerusalem Church, sent to Antioch in chapter 11 verse 22. He had stayed in Antioch for at least a year after that, ministering there.

And after that time, he had accompanied Paul on a visit to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11, bringing relief to the Christians in Jerusalem. They had returned at the end of chapter 12. And we read nothing about what occurred to Paul and Barnabas on that particular journey to Jerusalem in the book of Acts.

But the book of Galatians describes a private meeting with the pillars of the Jerusalem after Paul went there with Barnabas and Titus. During the visit, according to Paul's account in Galatians, he set before the Jerusalem leaders the message that he and Barnabas bore to the Gentiles. They had given Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, recognising that Paul had been entrusted with the mission to the uncircumcised in a manner comparable to the way that Peter was the chief minister entrusted with the mission to the circumcised.

If it was not already his principal base before he had returned from Jerusalem, Antioch was definitely the focus of Barnabas' mission thereafter. At the beginning of chapter 13, Barnabas is listed as one of the prophets and teachers of the Antioch church, alongside Saul whom he had brought there from Tarsus at the end of chapter 11. The Antioch church then set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission, according to the word of the Spirit.

Now they are back in Jerusalem again, albeit under slightly more complicated circumstances. At this point in the church's history, Jerusalem is still very much the centre. It's the place with the greatest influence and power.

Antioch is a church of growing importance and the doorway to the Gentile mission. The relationship between these two churches is of immense significance. If these two churches were to part ways, or if Antioch were simply to adapt to the demands of the Christians of a more Pharisaic persuasion in Jerusalem, the entire formation of a united Jew and Gentile church might founder, or never truly get off the ground to begin with.

Strengthening the bonds between these churches could not be more important. At this juncture, the bond is mostly one forged by a few key ministers such as Paul and Barnabas, and also by the relief provided by the Christians in Antioch to the poor Christians in Judea. The visit of the men from James, who had insisted that the Gentiles in Antioch needed to be circumcised, was near disastrous.

It was a threat to the Gentile mission in its very infancy, and it was a strain upon the fragile relationship between the two churches. Arriving at such a favourable judgement for the Gentile mission was immensely important, and naturally it would be a cause for considerable rejoicing when it was shared with the church in Antioch. The Jerusalem church sent some of their leading men, Silas and Judas called Bar-Sabbas, to strengthen the connection between the churches.

They also laid to rest any confusion that might have arisen from the earlier visit of the Judaizers from Jerusalem. They were teachers that had gone out from Jerusalem, and they had unsettled the minds of the Christians in Antioch, but they had not been sent on their mission by the apostles and elders. Their message was not approved.

To make sure that the message is communicated beyond any dispute, the council send these representatives of Jerusalem to confirm the judgement of the council by their own testimony, and to strengthen the bond between the churches by ministering among them for a time. The Jerusalem church also affirms their respect and love for Barnabas and Paul, commending their missionary ventures, which they did not consider controversial at all, but were in one mind in approving. They list the only four requirements that they would place upon them, abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.

The nature of these restrictions has been a matter of debate. Paul teaches against idol meat in 1 Corinthians chapters 8-10. There he begins with some arguments focusing on giving up freedom for the sake of others, so as not to scandalize them or harm their conscience.

In 1 Corinthians 8-13, Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. Later, Paul moves to some more absolute arguments against certain forms of participation in idol meat, showing that such meat represented association with demons themselves.

1 Corinthians 10-14-22 I speak as to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons are not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we

stronger than he? In his teaching then, Paul makes allowances for the possible difficulties that Gentiles might have in obtaining food without any sort of association with idols.

Making clear that the meat was not unclean in itself and that outside of a context where they would knowingly and openly be participating in a meal that was associated with the worship of idols, they could eat any meat without asking any questions. 1 Corinthians 10, verses 25-33 continues the argument in this way. I do not mean your conscience but his.

Much of the purpose of this commandment as Paul describes it seems to be to ensure that Jews are not given a cause of offence by Gentiles in the church. The Gentiles should be mindful of Jewish scruples. However, this commandment is also there in order that they might keep a clear distance from the idolatry that permeated the whole of pagan society, being careful not to compromise in a matter where it would be very easy to do so.

We should also observe that restrictions upon food sacrifice to idols were applied to Gentiles living among the Israelites in the book of Leviticus, in chapter 17, verses 7-9 of that book. So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

And you shall say to them, anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who serge in among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from his people. The restrictions upon consuming blood and eating strangled animals go together. The strangling of the animal was designed as a means of keeping the blood within.

This goes back to Genesis and the commandment given to Noah in chapter 9, verses 3-4. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

The same requirement to refrain from blood is given to the Gentiles living among the Jews in Leviticus, chapter 17, verses 10-14, the passage that immediately follows the one that we read earlier. If anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who serge in among them, eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, no person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who serge in among you eat blood. Anyone also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who serge in among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For the life of every creature is its blood, its blood is its life.

Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off. This prohibition then was not exclusive to Jews, but was more general to all peoples.

It arises from the connection between the life of creatures and their blood, a connection comparable to the connection between the soul and the eyes, for instance. It is not a literal identification of one with the other, but a symbolic manifestation of the one in the other. It should also be understood in the context of a sacrificial system.

As God said to his people, I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. In a context where blood sacrifices were being made, ingesting blood would have great significance. The question of whether this applies in the same way in societies where that symbolic bond does not function in the same way, where we are no longer sacrificing animals and engaging in blood rites, and where there is little chance of causing scandal to others, is a question upon which Christians differ.

Many European societies, for instance, though traditionally Christian, have eaten blood puddings. The final prohibition is upon sexual immorality. Why single out sexual immorality at this point? The other prohibitions concern foods, but this seems to be a more directly moral issue.

A few things might be noted on this front. First, sexual immorality connected with the other commandments in its more direct relationship to purity concerns. Sins such as, let's say, stealing, were morally prohibited, but didn't have the same relationship to purity as the defilement caused by sexual immorality.

Second, attitudes to sexual conduct were among the most pronounced differences between Jews and Gentiles. Many of the other requirements of the law might have been affirmed by pagan ethicists, but attitudes to sexual behavior could be different in very pronounced ways. Third, sexual immorality of various kinds was a further aspect of the commandments of Leviticus that applied to Jews and Gentiles alike.

The Council, then, it would seem, is simply affirming that the Gentiles need to observe the commandments that were placed upon Gentile sojourners among Israel, rather than needing to observe the whole law of Moses. The emissaries return with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. When the congregation is gathered together, the letter from the Jerusalem Council is read, and it meets with great joy.

Having considered the situation that the Antioch church was in, the cause for their joy should be quite evident. A very great deal was riding upon the response of the Jerusalem church. Had their message been a rebuke, the entire direction of the church would have changed, and the nature of the whole Christian movement would have been plunged into uncertainty.

Indeed, it had been in such uncertainty, after the teaching of the Judaizers who came from Jerusalem, until this letter resolved it. Judas and Silas, who had been sent up from Jerusalem, remain there for some time, ministering among them, further strengthening the bond between the two key churches of Antioch and Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Christians are then sent back to Jerusalem.

Verse 34, which refers to Silas deciding to stay, is omitted by most texts. While it might help us to explain why Silas is seemingly in Antioch, to accompany Paul on his second missionary journey a few verses later, it probably is not in the original text. And there are plenty of other explanations for why Silas could have returned, or not even left.

Luke just doesn't explain why. Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch and continue to minister there, alongside many other ministers. It seems that the work of Christ there is really growing.

A question to consider. How does Paul's treatment of issues of sexual morality differ from his treatment of idol food in the book of 1 Corinthians? How might reflecting upon Paul's teaching, and the teaching of Leviticus chapters 17 and 18, help us better to understand the place of these commandments in the life of the people of God today?