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March 6th: Proverbs 5 & Philippians 1:12-30

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Alastair Roberts

Drink from your own cistern. Paul confidently awaits his deliverance.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 5. And now, O sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your honour to others and your years to the merciless, lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labours go to the house of a foreigner. And at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, and you say, How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof.

I did not listen to the voice of my teachers, or incline my ear to my instructors. I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation. Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well.

Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets, let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely dear, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all

times with delight.

Be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman, and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? For a man's ways are before the eyes of the Lord, and he ponders all his paths. The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin.

He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray. Proverbs chapter 5 contains the eighth speech of the father to the son. The father gave a more general warning about wicked men and adulterous women in the prologue, but in these chapters those earlier warnings are elaborated.

Much of chapters 5-7 are devoted to warning the son against the adulterous woman in particular. She represents one of the greatest temptations and the greatest dangers that he faces. The chapter opens with an exhortation to the son to be attentive, addressing the son as a listener.

In verse 2 the father declares that the purpose of the attentive ear are the well-mastered lips. The statement here is similar to that of Malachi chapter 2 verse 7, for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. The lips of the well-taught son will be discreet and will guard knowledge.

As we see elsewhere in the book of Proverbs and in scripture more generally, a person's speech is powerfully indicative of their wisdom or their lack of it. The lips of a wise son are immediately contrasted with the lips of the forbidden woman. The wise son's lips guard knowledge, the forbidden woman's lips drip honey.

The dripping honeyed lips of the forbidden woman and the smoothness of her palate are perhaps intended to evoke the ease with which careless intercourse with the forbidden woman can move from seductive conversation to kisses and beyond. The language of dripping lips, while primarily having to do with seductive speech at this point, is elsewhere connected with sensual kisses in places like Song of Solomon chapter 4 verse 11. Your lips drip nectar, my bride.

Honey and milk are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon. The fool is especially susceptible to the sweet speech of the adulteress.

The fool's pride makes him vulnerable to flattery. Hating rebuke, he has never gained perspective upon himself, and the flattery that the adulteress gives is the perfect bait to hook him. It tells him what he wants to believe about himself, and fools are driven more by what they want to believe than by any desire for the actual truth.

Here the father warns that the sweetness and smoothness of the adulteress woman's

words are profoundly deceptive. Those who take her bait will discover that the consequences of doing so are exceedingly bitter, and for all of their apparent softness and smoothness, her words are as deadly and sharp as a two-edged sword. Once again the metaphor of the Way comes up.

Walking on the Way of Wisdom is not just about guarding your own steps, but about the company that you choose to keep. The Way of the Forbidden Woman is descending into destruction and death, moving away from the light into enveloping darkness, and those who associate with her will end up walking the same path. She is unmindful of and blind to her path.

Those who follow her are doomed to share her fate. The picture is further developed in chapter seven, which concludes with the following warning in verses twenty-five to twenty-seven. Let not your heart turn aside to her ways.

Do not stray into her paths, for many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death. The father gives his sons the most solemn warning against this woman, expounding upon some of the reasons why she is so dangerous.

The man who gets carelessly involved with the adulterous woman will find himself at the mercy of an angry husband and family, who will mercilessly bleed him dry. At that point he will be left with futile remorse, as his resources and his energies are depleted, and he is finally ruined and utterly shamed within his community, his house and his reputation in tatters. The warning here can be generalised to sexual immorality more generally, which wastes countless lives.

The careless young man may lose years of his life and his greatest figure in promiscuity, squandering the first fruits of his strength and resources on women who would happily devour him whole. We can imagine such a person in his late thirties and forties. He has had many broken relationships, he is paying support for children from whom he has alienated, he has had a costly divorce, he has wasted money on prostitutes or on his porn addiction, he is lonely, bitter and jaded, he has a few STDs, he is unable to connect with women in any emotionally healthy manner, and the best years of his life and the greatest of his energies and vigour are behind him, he has little honour in society, people regard him as a disreputable failure.

If only he had listened to the warnings when he had the chance. The accumulated bitter blows of life beat awareness of the folly of his chosen path into the careless son. However, the wise son does not have to learn lessons the hard way.

By heeding the warnings of his father, the benefits of the wisdom of the previous generation can be enjoyed by the next, with the son knowing little of the painful costs that he would otherwise have incurred, had he needed to experience the fate that his

father warns him about in order to obtain that knowledge. The alternative to the folly of pursuing the adulterous woman is fidelity and chastity in marriage. Within much of the Old Testament, sexual relations are focused upon procreation.

However, within the wisdom literature, sexual relations are a source of delight and pleasure. How a man handles his sex drive is a primary testing ground for wisdom. Folly in this area can be devastating, but a wise man who orders his sexual desire solely, but fully, towards one woman is promised preservation from the dissipation that afflicts the unchaste, and joy and delight in physical relations with his wife.

While the promiscuous man is depleted and consumed by his dissipation, the faithful man enjoys a sort of rejuvenation in the play of sexual union with the wife of his youth. Sexual relations here are described using metaphors of drinking, flowing waters, fountains, and love is spoken of as something that can intoxicate the one who imbibes it. In scripture, women are frequently associated with wells.

Rebecca, Rachel, and Zipporah were all met at wells. Wells are symbols of life, refreshment, and fertility. A fountain or a well can create a realm of life around it.

The Song of Solomon, chapter 4, verses 12-16, employs this imagery to speak about the bride. A garden larked is my sister, my bride, a spring larked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates, with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all choicest spices, a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.

Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind, blow upon my garden, let its spices flow, let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits. The foolish man wanders from promiscuous woman to promiscuous woman. His springs are scattered, their waters flow in the streets, where the prostitutes sell their bodies.

Rather than fountains that could sustain a glorious garden, these fountains have their waters wasted on the ground. Instead of this, the wise son should devote himself to one woman, to whom he is exclusively committed, a well that is his alone. He is to be intoxicated with the love of his wife, having eyes for her alone, sensually delighting in her body, and rejoicing in and enjoying her.

It is important to attend to the metaphors here, flowing fresh water and intoxication. Sexuality is something in which life and energies flow between people. Sexuality is something that causes us to lower our guards, to relax and to open up, like we might when drinking alcohol.

This is what sexuality is supposed to involve. Such sex is not safe. In such sex you are dropping your defences, opening yourself up, and allowing something of your life to flow

to another person.

Indeed, the things that make sex unsafe are the very things that make sex so good. When we read the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery, we may merely hear the prohibition. However, much of the purpose of the wisdom literature is to acquaint us with the rationale, with the goodness and wisdom of the commandment.

The man who commits himself to one fountain, a well exclusive to himself, can enter into the fullness of the goodness of sex. He can drop his defences. He can become utterly intoxicated in a woman.

Waters can flow out, bringing life and fruitfulness. Such a man can enjoy the blessing of profound emotional openness with, and exposure to, a woman. He can drink fully of her love, without being afraid of losing his wits and being destroyed by her.

By contrast, our promiscuous society is all about the emotional and physical prophylactics that prevent waters of life from flowing between people, that try to protect people from really getting intoxicated. However, intoxication and waters flowing in sexual relations are unavoidable. Even if no STDs are spread and the contraception works, men will still expend their sexual vigour, their emotional energies, much of their wealth and years of their lives on women who may be open springs, when they might have given themselves fully to one woman and delighted in her without reservation or guardedness.

When this is considered, being a one-woman man is seen to be the clear wise course. While being such a man involves resisting the law of the adulterous and other women, the Father suggests that the best way to resist such women is to delight even more fully in one's wife. The promiscuous man can never really relate fully to, or unreservedly enjoy any woman, because he is pursuing sexual pleasure against its grain, against the union and mutual lowering of defences that it naturally involves.

He does not want to get too attached, she does not want to risk getting her heart broken. The faithful husband, however, is to become the lifelong lover of one woman, as she is free to let her life flow freely, always looking for ways to deepen and enjoy their bond more fully. Our paths are all overseen by the Lord, who upholds the moral order of the world.

In this moral order, sin's judgments generally follow from it as a natural consequence. Sin entangles the sinner within it, and the sinner is caught in his own iniquities. The wicked man is the architect of his own destruction.

Wickedness is ultimately revealed to be folly, the result of proudly resisting instruction. A question to consider, how might this passage inform our reading of Song of Solomon as wisdom literature? Philippians chapter 1 verses 12-30 I want you to know, brothers, that

what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me, yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. 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.

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. In Paul's epistles, the message of what God is doing for and through other Christians in other localities is frequently related as a matter of importance.

It doesn't just matter that God is doing things, the fact that people are spreading the news and talking about it matters too. This is especially true as such reports are transformed into prayers of thanksgiving, as the word of the success of God's word in various persons and locations returns to him in the form of praise. Paul is often eager to stir up such reports into a godly buzz about what God is accomplishing, so that Christians will become emboldened in their witness, and so that the work of God's word would yield a richer harvest of praise from those whose ears its victories reach.

In the second half of Philippians chapter 1, Paul discusses the way in which the news of his own imprisonment has itself become a means of the gospel's spread. In particular, it had become known throughout the entire imperial guard, and to others of the establishment, that Paul's imprisonment was literally in Christ. Paul's imprisonment wasn't just for Christ, but in Christ, not merely something occurring as a result of Paul's witness for Christ, but a way in which Paul himself was manifestly participating in Christ.

By imprisoning this troublesome Jewish teacher, the Romans set up the conditions for the report of his master, Jesus the Messiah, to be spread throughout the palace guard. The message of Jesus was being spread through the gossip of the soldiers, who presumably saw something different and remarkable about this particular prisoner. And Paul's imprisonment and suffering at their hands was a way in which the fact that his life was lived in his crucified Lord shone with a brightness that could not be ignored.

All of this created wonderful new opportunities for the gospel message, and illustrated Christ's glorious way of achieving his great victories under the mask of defeats. Who would believe that the imprisonment of one of his leading heralds would be one of the ways in which Jesus would cause the message of his lordship and his gracious forgiveness to penetrate so deeply into the establishment that executed him. But Paul's imprisonment was not only producing fruit among the Roman gods.

His example was emboldening other Christians to bear courageous witness even in the teeth of the threat of similar imprisonment. The report of Christ's grace to Paul in his imprisonment robbed the threats of the authorities of the fear that they would typically instil. Ironically, some of the people who had been emboldened to speak were doing so out of bad motives, wanting to cause Paul distress or to build little kingdoms for themselves now that their rival Paul was no longer able to keep them in check.

They weren't preaching a fundamentally false message like the Judaizers, but they were preaching out of bad or mixed motives. However, whatever their intentions, the word of Christ was spreading through them nonetheless. If Christ could make the word of his kingdom spread in the gossip of Roman gods, he could spread it just as effectively through the words of petty and proud preachers.

Just as in the cross itself, the intentions of the enemies of Christ will lead them to become the unwitting ministers of his victory. Not all of the preachers Paul mentioned, however, were of such a character. Some, rather than viewing Paul's imprisonment as their chance to get ahead in a rivalry that they had with him, recognised that Paul had been appointed to imprisonment by the Lord for the service of the gospel itself.

Christ had put him in prison as a means of advancing his kingdom. Recognising the sovereignty of Christ over the intentions of men, and what Christ was accomplishing through the situation, Paul can respond to what would seem to almost any human being as a severe setback, not with despair, but with rejoicing. Rejoicing in prison and in

suffering is one of the marks of the early church.

Paul can also rejoice as he is assured that, through the prayers of the Philippians and others, and the work of the Spirit, the situation will yield his deliverance or salvation. The deliverance that he expects is a divine vindication, and he alludes to Job 13, verses 15-16 here. Though he slay me, I will hope in him, yet I will argue my ways to his face.

This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him. Paul shares this confidence in God, a confidence that will not be shaken by death itself. Paul is looking to his approaching trial, but looking beyond the human court before which he will stand, to a greater court, from which he is awaiting a glorious vindication, a vindication achieved through the petitions of the Philippians and others, and the advocate of the Holy Spirit.

More than anything, he desires Christ to be honoured in his body, in his current physical existence, whether this takes the form of life or death. While most would look at the trial that Paul would soon face with great concern over whether it would yield a death sentence, because Paul is looking beyond it, he can speak about the alternatives of release or execution with a measure of ambivalence. Whatever the human court determines in his case, it is the verdict of the heavenly court that he is awaiting, and he can confidently place himself in the hands of its judge, assured of the salvation that he will bring.

The choice that Paul faces is between life and death. For Paul, living is opportunity to serve and exalt Christ by his labours, to minister to his people, and to extend his kingdom. We might here recall Galatians 2.20 On the one hand, being at home in the body, as Paul observes in 2 Corinthians 5.6, involves being away from the Lord.

Death would not merely mean a release from Paul's troubles, but would bring a new intimacy and closeness with Christ in the intermediate state, while awaiting the final resurrection. For Paul's purely personal interest, this would be preferable. However, Paul believes that Christ still has a purpose for him to serve, in ministering to the Philippians, so that they might grow further in their faith, and have reason to thank and glorify Christ in his release and his visiting of them again.

Whatever happens, Paul knows that the progress of the gospel and the glory of Christ is the ultimate end. The one thing Paul is concerned about is that the Philippians conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. Whether he is released to minister to them again, or is restrained from visiting them by continued imprisonment or death, Paul desires to hear of their united endurance, bound together by a common struggle for the truth of the gospel.

They should be standing firm in the one spirit, God's Holy Spirit, and united in the one mindset of Christ, fearlessly facing their adversaries and opponents. Such fearless behaviour would actually evidence the truth of the message of judgment and salvation

the Philippians proclaimed. The more confidently the Philippians faced persecution, the more that their persecutors would be led to question their own position, suspecting that confidence in the judgment upon the enemies of Christ, of which the Philippian Christians spoke, was the only explanation for such conduct.

The Philippians could draw confidence from the fearlessness of their own number, seeing ordinary men and women displaying a courage in the face of death and persecution that could only be explained by the work of the Spirit, and would, as they had already been by the example of Paul, be emboldened in their own witness and behaviour. All of this would be evidence to them and their opponents that God was at work. One of the ways that the lives of the saints bear witness, both encouraging and convicting us, is through their remarkable conduct that testifies to their recognition of something with the eyes of faith that exceeds fleshly perception.

They display virtues and rise to a stature that is astonishing, precisely as they witness something that others don't see. However, even when people don't see what they see, their lives themselves bear witness to the existence of such a reality, as they are clearly living in terms of a greater horizon, one that elicits virtues from them that are both glorious and utterly paradoxical in terms of the immediate horizons that everyone else witnesses. Paul concludes this chapter with a remarkable statement.

For the sake of Christ, it had been granted to the Philippians not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake. Our very faith is something granted to us by God, who opened our eyes to his truth so that we might respond to him. Apart from God's work of grace towards us in Christ, we would not have any capacity to respond.

Beyond this, however, we have been granted to suffer for Christ's sake, knowing the fellowship of Christ's suffering, and in our suffering for him, rendering some thanksgiving for the immensity of his suffering for us. In chapter 3 verses 10 to 11, Paul will speak of sharing his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. A question to consider, how does Paul's confidence in Christ's power and rule in the spread of the gospel and its work inform his approach to the many adversaries of and obstacles to the gospel? How many examples can you find of these adversaries and obstacles in this chapter, and how do we see the confidence of Paul in the gospel in the face of them?