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February 4th: Jeremiah 34 & 2 Corinthians 1:1—2:11

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Zedekiah's broken covenant of emancipation. Paul's painful relations with the Corinthians.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 34. Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem, and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah, for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained. The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after king Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother.

And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant, that everyone would set free his slave, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again. They obeyed and set them free. But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into

subjection as slaves.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years. You must set him free from your service.

But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor. And you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name.

But then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the Lord, you have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor. Behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence and to famine, declares the Lord.

I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts, the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives.

Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. And Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his officials, I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives, into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon, which has withdrawn from you. Behold, I will command, declares the Lord, and will bring them back to this city, and they will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire.

I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant. Jeremiah chapter 34 opens with a word of judgment from the Lord through Jeremiah to Zedekiah, the king of Judah. Similar expressions of judgment to this can be found in chapter 21 verses 1 to 7, 37 verses 3 to 10, and chapter 38 verses 14 to 28, parallels that Walter Brueggemann observes.

The prophecy dates from the period of the siege of Jerusalem before its final downfall. Nebuchadnezzar and his armies and all of his allies surround the city. Only a few fortified cities remain alongside Jerusalem in the land.

Almost all of the land has fallen into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah's message is not encouraging. The city of Jerusalem will also be given into the hand of the king of

Babylon, and he will destroy it.

And king Zedekiah won't escape. He will see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak to him face to face. Indeed, the king of Babylon will be the last thing that he sees.

His eyes are put out in chapter 39 verse 7, and he is taken away captive to Babylon. In contrast to Jehoiakim, there is some mitigation of Zedekiah's judgment. While he will die in captivity, he will die in peace, and he will be given a proper burial.

People will mourn his passing. Alongside Jerusalem, Lachish and Ezekiel are the only fortified cities that are left in the land. We have archaeological support for some of the history here.

In the Lachish letters in the British Museum, which are broken pieces of pottery, have messages that were sent to the commander of the garrison at Lachish, telling him that someone is watching for the signals from Lachish, but they cannot see any from Ezekiel. Perhaps by that point, Ezekiel had already fallen. From verse 8 to the end of the chapter, we have an example of infidelity, and this contrasts with an example of fidelity in the Rechabites in the following chapter.

While the chapters are chronologically divided, and chapter 35 dates from a much earlier period, they are thematically united, and there is a juxtaposition between these two accounts. The law of the release of slaves in the seventh year does not seem to have been well observed. On the 50th year, in the year of Jubilee, there was a more general release, but this does not seem to have been widely practiced either.

In verse 8, we learn that Zedekiah had made a solemn covenant with all of the people in Jerusalem, and had proclaimed a more general release. The exact character of the release that Zedekiah proclaimed here is not entirely clear, and scholars debate it. Some think that since the release of slaves had not been more generally practiced, that this was a more general release to make up for its non-practice earlier.

Others have suggested that it was only reinitiating the practice of Deuteronomy chapter 15, and that it was not a more general release at a single time. Yet others have suggested that it was a year of Jubilee, and yet others that it was not related to the laws of the Pentateuch. Given the allusion back to Deuteronomy later on, this seems unlikely.

Nor does Zedekiah's covenant seem to involve an ending of slavery altogether. The background for this is found in places like Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 12-15. If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.

And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress, as the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall

remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.

Therefore I command you this today. The motivation for Zedekiah's covenant has also been debated. Perhaps during the siege, when the fields are no longer accessible, the slaves are not useful out there, and so they are needed to fight.

So setting them free makes more sense. Others have suggested a far more selfish motivation. As the slaves aren't able to work for their masters during the siege, the slaves want to give up responsibility to care for them.

Setting them free is a way of removing the safety net that they were responsible to provide. However, if this were the case, it would seem that this would be part of what the Lord would condemn them for. However, it is not mentioned in the condemnation.

Another possibility, more realistic, is that they think that this will curry favour with the Lord. The Babylonians are surrounding the city, and they believe that if they release their slaves, the Lord may have favour upon them and remove the Babylonians from them. When the Babylonians do lift the siege for a period of time, when the Egyptians temporarily appear to be a threat, they might feel that their move has worked out, and so they want to have their slaves back.

The Lord now condemns them for renegeing on the covenant. In doing so, the Lord rehearses the commandment they were supposed to obey in releasing their slaves. And this section is introduced by a statement that The Lord himself made a covenant with their fathers.

The earlier verses spoke of Zedekiah making a covenant with the people. And here the Lord makes a covenant with the fathers. Zedekiah and his people released Hebrews from slavery, and the Lord released them from slavery, out of Egypt.

The commandment that he gave the people concerning their slaves was intended to continue what he had done for them. They had been granted a great Sabbath of release, and so on the Sabbath years and on the year of Jubilee, they were supposed to grant a Sabbath release for those working for them. When they failed to do this, they became more like Egypt than the people that they were called to be.

The contrast between the action of Zedekiah and his people, and the action of the Lord, the one who set free the captives and kept his covenant, should be clearly apparent here. Their initial action in releasing their slaves is commended. They did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

The fact that they are commended in such a fashion suggests that their action was not driven purely, or primarily, by cynical motives. Rather, they were really seeking to please the Lord, perhaps to gain favour with him, but in a way that was not inappropriate.

However, there is a tragic symmetry in verses 15 and 16.

They recently turned and did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and then in verse 16, they turned and profaned his name. The Lord will deliver them to a poetic justice, just as they had disobeyed the Lord in not properly proclaiming liberty. So the Lord will proclaim to them liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.

They had not truly released their servants, so they would be released to their fate. In making the covenant, or cutting the covenant, they had enacted what seems to have been a self-maledictory oath. Walking between parts of an animal that had been cut in two, they were proclaiming upon themselves the curse that the same should happen to them if they failed to keep the covenant.

This form of covenant ceremony might remind us of the covenant the Lord made with Abraham back in Genesis chapter 15. As a result of their sin, they will be given into the hand of their enemies, and their dead bodies, like the dead body of the calf, will be left as food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. At this point, the king of Babylon seems to have withdrawn.

He's gone off to fight the Egyptians. This seems to have been what spurred the people to take their slaves back again. However, the king of Babylon is going to come back.

He will take the city of Jerusalem and burn it with fire, and all the cities of Judah will be made a desolation. In failing to grant liberty to their slaves, Israel was negating the reality of the Lord's liberation of them that should have been the foundation of their national life. As they failed to live as an exodus-given and exodus-giving people, they will be sent away into exile.

A question to consider, where else in scripture do we find significant references to the Sabbath year or the year of Jubilee in the connection with the release of slaves? If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation. And if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us.

On Him we have set our hope that He will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.

For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand, and I hope you will fully understand, just as you did partially understand us, that on the day of our Lord Jesus, you will boast of us as we will boast of you. Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. I

wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia, and have you send me on my way to Judea.

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say yes, yes, and no, no, at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been yes and no. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not yes and no, but in Him it is always yes. For all the promises of God find their yes in Him.

That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory. And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put His seal on us, and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. But I call God to witness against me.

It was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth, not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith. For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice.

For I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you.

For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough. So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

For this is why I wrote, that I might test you, and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Paul introduces the second epistle to the Corinthians in a manner typical of his letters. He identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. The letter is also from Timothy, who from verses such as verse 19 of this chapter is clearly not Paul's co-author, but more likely a fellow minister of Paul known to the Corinthian church.

It is addressed to the Corinthian church in particular, but also to the wider body of Christians in the region. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It also seems to have been the most significant church within that region.

Paul had received much less of a response in Athens in Acts chapter 17 than he later did in Corinth in Acts chapter 18. Paul gives them his customary greeting and then moves

into an expression of thanksgiving. This opening formula is common to many of Paul's letters.

Paul's thanksgiving begins by focusing upon the theme of God's comfort. God is the God who communicates comfort, and communicates comfort in order that we might be able to share it with others in turn. God's gifts conscript their recipients into the task of giving in turn.

When God gives to us, he gives us the capacity to give to others. For the sharing of comfort, there is a prior sharing in affliction. The people of God share in the afflictions of Christ himself.

Paul particularly has in view here what we suffer for the sake of Christ's name. Just as Christ was at odds with the world and its powers, so faithful Christians will be. The sufferings of the Messiah were the birth pangs through which the new age would dawn.

And in the story of the Gospels, the period running up to Christ's death is a time of testing and tribulation, followed by the great sufferings undergone by Christ in the crucifixion. This same pattern is one that plays itself out in the life of his people. However, while they participate in the sufferings and the tribulations of the Messiah by which the new age will dawn, they also participate in the comfort of the victory that Christ has already accomplished.

Like Christ's sufferings for his people, the Apostles' suffering has a vicarious character to it. They are suffering for the salvation and the comfort of the people to whom they have been sent. However, the Corinthians in their turn will share in the sufferings of the Apostles, as the Apostles share in the sufferings of the Messiah, so that they too might enjoy comfort with them.

This vision of sharing in the sufferings of the Messiah and finding true comfort in the very place that might seem least promising is one that contrasts with the sort of super-spirituality that had been popular among the Corinthians. The close entanglement of comfort and affliction that Paul describes here also fits with his attention to the paradoxical character of life in Christ, where poverty and wealth, weakness and power, folly and wisdom are also radically reshaped by the way that Christ undermines the structures and the values of the world. Paul then proceeds to describe a particular trial that he and his fellow missionaries had undergone while in Asia.

They had, at this time, despaired of life itself and been tested beyond their very limits, feeling that they were as good as condemned to death. However, through it they had depended upon God rather than upon their own strength, and as a result had discovered God's power in their situation, the very power by which he raises the dead. This deliverance had left them with greater confidence of future deliverance.

It was precisely in being brought to the utter end of their own resources that they discovered the sufficiency of God's strength in their situation. And this is a theme to which Paul will return later in the Epistle, in chapter 12 verses 9 to 10, for instance. But he said to me, Paul charges the Corinthians to help them in prayer, interceding for them in their trials and joining with them in thanks for their deliverance.

Paul began this section by blessing and praising God for his comforting of them in their afflictions, and now he concludes it by calling the Corinthians to a companionship of intercession and thanksgiving in his ministry, so that God's goodness to them, Paul and his fellow missionaries, will lead to an outpouring of gratitude from many, glorifying God. The sufferings of Paul and his companions are an opportunity for other Christians to join them in knowing and giving thanks for the blessing of answered intercession when the Lord brings deliverance. Paul speaks of his boast in his gospel ministry.

This is not a boast that rests upon his own strength, superiority or self-sufficiency, but in the call and the empowerment of God that equips him and enables him to fulfil his commission. Paul can make a very bold claim about his integrity here. He has acted in consistency, purity and sincerity.

This wasn't by some earthly wisdom of Paul's own, but by the grace of God that was at work through him. Paul has written to the Corinthians with frankness and with clarity, not hiding anything from them or dissembling his motives. His hope is that they will come fully to understand, not just in the more immediate future, but on the final day, when Paul's desire is that the missionaries' boast in the Corinthians will be reciprocated and answered by the Corinthians' boast in them, as both praise God for each other.

Paul's expression of his confidence before God in the integrity of his ministry and the dependability of his word needs to be understood in the light of what comes next. Paul has seemingly opened himself up to an accusation that this is not the case. He has expressed his desire previously to visit the Corinthians, but as things transpired, he didn't visit them, but sent them a painful letter of rebuke instead.

The original plan had involved two visits to Corinth, one on the way to Macedonia and another on the return journey, with the Corinthians sending him on his way to Judea. However, Paul hadn't done this. Since writing 1 Corinthians, Paul had sent Timothy, his close fellow worker, to the Corinthians.

Presumably, Paul had been informed by Timothy that the situation in Corinth had badly deteriorated and that it required his personal presence and attention. Paul had then paid a visit to the Corinthians, to which he refers in chapter 2, verse 1. This was a painful visit, and after this he had written another letter to them, a letter that was also described as painful. He had done this instead of visiting them in person, as he had originally intended.

And this had all left Paul open to the accusation that he was unreliable, not a man of his word, inconsistent, someone who ran hot and cold. This accusation for Paul is an incredibly serious one, and he is very concerned to answer it. A challenge to the reliability of his word and testimony cuts to the heart of his apostolic witness.

Paul does not try to firewall the question of his integrity in communicating his travel plans from the gospel testimony that he bears, as if the latter really matters but the former can be brushed off as a realm where white lies and unreliability and wishy-washiness are legitimate, or at least matters of little consequence. Paul's message of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness is fundamental, and it is incredibly important that his behaviour comports with this. And Paul makes clear that he has been faithful in this respect.

God doesn't speak with in clarity or inconsistency in Christ. Rather, God's word in Christ is a resounding yes to all of his promises, to which the bold Amen of the Church must answer. It is this faithful and trustworthy God that established the Corinthians with Paul in Christ.

He has anointed them for their ministry, he has placed a seal upon them – perhaps Paul has baptism in mind here – and has given them the guarantee of the Spirit, a down payment assuring them of the coming fullness of their redemption. Paul calls God as his witness to his integrity. Paul's decision not to visit Corinth, as he had originally intended, was not vacillation on Paul's part.

It wasn't Paul running hot and cold in his relationship with the Corinthians. Rather, Paul decided against a visit precisely on account of his care and love for the Corinthians. Had he gone, his visit would have been difficult and painful for them.

Paul was, as it were, the Corinthians' father in the Gospel. He had sown the seed of the word by which they had first come to faith. However, as a good father, his desire was to avoid being overbearing and authoritarian with them.

He did not want to lord it over the Corinthians' faith, as if he was the master of it. Rather, his desire is to play the part of a faithful father, whose wish is the joy and well-being of his children, and whose rebukes are kept as gentle as they can possibly be, without losing their effect. He wants to have the joy of seeing his children grow, and that requires not dominating over them.

A painful letter was a softer and gentle correction than a painful visit. So, out of love for the Corinthians, Paul spared them a harsher and potentially more authoritarian approach. Paul does not want to boss the Corinthians around and lord it over them, but to assist them in their growth.

What he hopes for from the Corinthians is a sharing of joy. However, had he visited in a

way that brought them pain, he would be looking for gladness from the very people to whom he had brought grief. The appropriate relationship between the Corinthians and Paul was one of rich reciprocity.

They should be comforted in Paul's comfort. Paul and the Corinthians should be praying for and giving thanks for God's deliverances of each other. They should be boasting in each other.

Paul wrote to them out of a deep pain, yet communicating his love precisely because this longed-for reciprocity and mutuality was broken. And he really did not want to visit them in a situation where this lack of mutual joy would be painfully and clearly absent, unless it were absolutely necessary. We don't know exactly what happened in Corinth, but we can get some hints of it.

Chapter 7, verse 12 might give us some vague sense. Chapter 7, verse 11 suggests that the Corinthian congregation had proven themselves innocent of the wrong themselves. The wrongdoer had been subjected to church discipline, which now seems to have been proven successful.

He too was now grieving for the wrong that he had done, and now the church has encouraged to restore him to fellowship. Exclusion from church fellowship and excommunication, which is likely what was involved here, is a very serious sanction. But the desired end is repentance and restoration.

Which Paul calls for here. Paul's desire was not punitive, but restorative. It seems most likely that Paul himself was the directly wronged party, the offence causing great pain between Paul and the Corinthians, perhaps leading some of the Corinthians to question whether, as a result of being hurt, Paul must have abandoned his love for them when he didn't visit them again.

Paul, however, speaks of the matter delicately. He doesn't want to open up the wound. He now charges the Corinthians to forgive and restore the offender.

He forgives those that they forgive. He does not want to lord it over them, but affirms them in their decision in the matter. The Corinthians had reaffirmed their love to Paul, and Paul's desire was reconciliation of all parties.

The alternative to forgiveness in such a situation was the triumph of Satan's designs. Satan's wish is to produce discord that festers into lasting bitterness, unforgiveness and breaches between people. Ready forgiveness and joyful reconciliation is the way that the designs of Satan can be resisted in such matters.

A question to consider. What lessons can we learn from the way that Paul conceives of and exercises his apostolic authority in this chapter? How can we apply these lessons to the ways that we treat others who are under our authority?

