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October 17th: 2 Kings 8 & 1 John 5

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Hazael of Syria anointed. Keep yourself from idols.

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

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Transcript

2 Kings 8. Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, Arise and depart with your household, and sojourn wherever you can, for the Lord has called for a famine, and it will come upon the land for seven years. So the woman arose and did according to the word of the man of God. She went with her household and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years.

And at the end of the seven years, when the woman returned from the land of the Philistines, she went to appeal to the king for her house and her land. Now the king was talking with Gehazi, the servant of the man of God, saying, Tell me all the great things that Elisha has done. And while he was telling the king how Elisha had restored the dead to life, behold, the woman whose son he had restored to life appealed to the king for her house and her land.

And Gehazi said, My lord, O king, here is the woman, and here is her son whom Elisha

restored to life. And when the king asked the woman, she told him. So the king appointed an official for her, saying, Restore all that was hers, together with all the produce of the fields from the day that she left the land until now.

Now Elisha came to Damascus. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, was sick. And when it was told him, The man of God has come here, the king said to Haziël, Take a present with you, and go to meet the man of God, and inquire of the lord through him, saying, Shall I recover from this sickness? So Haziël went to meet him, and took a present with him, all kinds of goods of Damascus, forty camels' loads.

When he came and stood before him, he said, Your son Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, has sent me to you, saying, Shall I recover from this sickness? And Elisha said to him, Go say to him, You shall certainly recover. But the lord has shown me that he shall certainly die. And he fixed his gaze and stared at him until he was embarrassed.

And the man of God wept. And Haziël said, Why does my lord weep? He answered, Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel. You will set on fire their fortresses, and you will kill their young men with the sword, and dash in pieces their little ones, and rip open their pregnant women.

And Haziël said, What is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing? Elisha answered, The lord has shown me that you are to be king over Syria. Then he departed from Elisha, and came to his master, who said to him, What did Elisha say to you? And he answered, He told me that you would certainly recover. But the next day he took the bedcloth, and dipped it in water, and spread it over his face till he died.

And Haziël became king in his place. In the fifth year of Joram the son of Ahab, king of Israel, when Jehoshaphat was king of Judah, Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, began to reign. He was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem.

And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Yet the Lord was not willing to destroy Judah for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever.

In his days, Edom revolted from the rule of Judah, and set up a king of their own. Then Joram passed over to Zahar with all his chariots and rose by night. And he and his chariot commanders struck the Edomites who had surrounded him, but his army fled home.

So Edom revolted from the rule of Judah to this day. Then Libna revolted at the same time. Now the rest of the acts of Joram, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? So Joram slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David.

And Ahaziah his son reigned in his place. In the twelfth year of Joram the son of Ahab, king of Israel, Ahaziah the son of Jehoram, king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned one year in Jerusalem.

His mother's name was Athaliah. She was a granddaughter of Amri, king of Israel. He also walked in the way of the house of Ahab, and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as the house of Ahab had done.

For he was son-in-law to the house of Ahab. He went with Jehoram, the son of Ahab, to make war against Hazael, king of Syria, at Ramoth-Gilead. And the Syrians wounded Joram.

And king Joram returned to be healed in Jezreel of the wounds that the Syrians had given him at Ramoth-Gilead, when he fought against Hazael, king of Syria. And Ahaziah, the son of Jehoram, king of Judah, went down to see Joram, the son of Ahab, in Jezreel, because he was sick. Chapter six of the book of second Kings ended with a woman seeking help from the king in a time of famine, and the king was powerless to help.

Chapter eight begins with the king now able to assist a woman after a famine, on account of the memory of the prophet Elisha. The famine mentioned here seems to be the same one as afflicted Samaria, in chapters six and seven. Elisha had provided forewarning about the famine, in a way that extended the deliverance of the Lord to others.

There are possible connections here with the story of the Exodus, going into another country as a result of a seven year famine. In Genesis chapter ten, the Philistines are associated with the Egyptians, and then the woman returns to find that her land is lost, before it is later restored to her. These early verses of the chapter involve a surprising scene.

Two of the characters that have been previously mentioned in the story, who are very negatively portrayed, Gehazi and king Jehoram, are reflecting upon Elisha's works in his absence, telling the great deeds that the Lord has accomplished through him. As Gehazi is telling the story of the raising of the woman's child, lo and behold the woman comes to ask for the restoration of her land, the land that she lost when she left the country. The recounting of the story of the woman is left off, as her story continues in the land being restored to her by the king.

The return to the land, and the land being restored, is a sort of jubilee. It's like the original entrance into the land, where with the seven-fold circuit of Jericho on the seventh day, the land is restored with the blowing of trumpets. It looks back, but Peter Lighthouse notes that it also possibly looks forward to the exile.

Israel leaving the land and dwelling among the nations for a period of time, could be

restored to the land if the memory of the prophet is preserved. King Jehoram, presuming it is him, seems to have a rather different attitude after the events of Samaria. He's far more positively inclined to Elisha.

We should also note that the king's restoration of the woman's lost land is parallel to Elisha's restoration of her lost child. Remembering and meditating on the deeds of the prophet inspires to appropriate and analogous action in the present. And it might make us think of an implicit promise to Israel, that their seed will be raised from the dead of exile, and their lost land will be restored to them.

We've seen negative images of Israel and Judah in the cannibalistic mothers of chapter 6, and now we have a possible positive image of how faithful to the word of the prophet they might know restoration and deliverance. In 1 Kings 19, verses 15-17, the Lord said to Elijah, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you arrive you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place, and the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Immediately after this Elijah had gone on to anoint Elisha, but the reader of the text will have been surprised to note that neither Hazael nor Jehu are anointed by Elijah.

Those anointings don't actually occur until chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Kings. To understand this we should think about the ministry of Elijah and Elisha as a two-part ministry. There is a connection between the two.

Elisha continues the ministry of Elijah by the double portion of his spirit. The two ministries are a two-part ministry. Elijah's ministry is a ministry of the wilderness, followed by the ministry of Elisha which is a ministry of the land.

Elisha will be the one who completes the commissioned task of Elijah. He is the one that will have to anoint these two men. We may be surprised to encounter judgement here, just as there seems to be an apparent thawing in Jehoram's attitude towards Elisha.

He's asking about the works of Elisha from Gehazi and he has just performed an act of kingly justice in restoring the Shunammite's land to her. Nevertheless, Jehoram, while his evil is less than that of Ahab his father, is still an evil king and the death sentence hanging over the Amorite dynasty will fall upon him and his kingdom. He never truly repents.

We see here that the reputation of the prophet has extended beyond the land of Israel. Elisha was involved in the healing of Naaman in chapter 5 and also in the sparing of the Syrian army in chapter 6 verses 8-23. Israel was called to be a light to the nations and the nations are now coming to Israel to learn from the Lord, more specifically from Elisha the man of God.

While the role of the prophets to this point has largely been confined to Israel and Judah, now we're seeing the role of the prophets bringing God's word out and extending Israel's influence to the surrounding nations and empires. Israel will later be scattered throughout the world, not just as a punishment but a means of spreading that light of God's truth to other peoples. God's word is going international.

John the Baptist had wondered whether Jesus was the one expected or whether to wait for another. He had heard about the mighty works of Christ, the way that he healed the sick, about his casting out of demons and about the way that he was teaching the poor. However, he had prophesied that the one coming after him would bring judgment, that he would come with fire, that he would purge the threshing floor, and that the axe was laid to the root of the trees.

And then Jesus comes along and he brings healing and life. We can understand John the Baptist scratching his head and wondering whether this was indeed the one that he had foretold. One could imagine Elijah having the same feeling about Elisha.

When he met with the Lord at Horeb, he had received this great message of judgment, that God was going to judge the people and that he was going to do so through Hazael, Jehu and Elisha. And then Elisha comes on the scene and nothing happens. Well, not judgment anyway.

He raises the dead. He delivers people from debt. He miraculously multiplies food.

He provides deliverance from famine. He heals a foreign leper. All of these things are great but they don't fulfil what we've been waiting for since chapter 19 of 1 Kings.

We started the book of 2 Kings with fire coming down from heaven, but since then we've not seen an awful lot of judgment. Why is this the case and how can reflecting upon the story of John the Baptist and Jesus help us to understand it? I think in the case of Jesus, as in the case of Elisha, the deliverer brings life and gathers a remnant community first and then judgment falls. Elisha has been forming a community, the community of the sons of the prophets that surrounds him.

And with them a wider body of people who believe in the word of the Lord. When judgment comes, these people will be preserved through it as the true remnant of Israel. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, wants to know whether he will recover from his sickness and he sends Hazael with an enormous gift.

Elisha, however, gives him an ambiguous word and there are various ways to understand this. There could perhaps be an ambiguity in the statement that Elisha gives to Hazael to deliver to the king. The statement could be read in two different ways.

By one way of reading it, Ben-Hadad would not live and by another he would. And then Elisha clears up the confusion and the ambiguity by explicitly and forthrightly foretelling

what will occur, leaving Hazael himself to determine how to deliver the message. Alternatively, the message itself could be a clear statement that he will live, followed by a statement that he will not live.

Elsewhere, in places like 1 Kings chapter 22, we see such contradictory words from the Lord, ways in which he deceives people to their doom. Whichever it is, Hazael is going to become king in Ben-Hadad's place. And Hazael does not just deliver the message, he actually fulfills the prophecy by killing the king Ben-Hadad.

And by the fact that the prophecy is delivered to Hazael himself, the prophecy provokes the actions by which it will be fulfilled. The chapter concludes by turning our gaze towards the southern kingdom of Judah. However, at this time, the northern kingdom of Israel, in its rebellion, is clearly setting the terms for both of the kingdoms.

There has been a close convergence of the two nations. Jehoshaphat had been unwise in fighting with Israel on two different occasions. In chapter 22 of 1 Kings he had narrowly escaped with his life.

In chapter 3 of 2 Kings he had also been part of a losing battle fighting alongside Israel. While Jehoshaphat was a good king, he ends up bringing Judah into a very damaging alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel. His son marries the daughter of Ahab, Athaliah.

And shockingly we read that he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He may be a king of Judah, he may be a son of David, but the pattern for both northern and southern kingdom is provided by the sinful Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, and all of his successors. While he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, the Lord preserved a testimony within the south, preserving the house of David so that David would not be wiped out.

Just as the northern kingdom had lost Moab, so the kingdom of Judah loses Edom. Libna also revolts at the same time. The land is being chipped away.

After Jehoram dies, he is succeeded by his son Ahaziah. Once again he walks in the ways of the kings of Israel, his mother being Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab, and the granddaughter of Amrei. We might also note that the names of the two sons of Ahab who reign are Ahaziah and Jehoram, and now we've had a Jehoram and an Ahaziah on the southern throne.

The nations are starting to mirror each other. A question to consider. At the end of the chapter, Ahaziah joins Jehoram of the northern kingdom to fight at Ramoth Gilead against the Syrians with Hazael.

Jehoram is wounded and he returns to Jezreel to be healed. How might reading this event in the light of chapters 21 and 22 of 1 Kings help us to understand its significance? 1 John chapter 5 2 John chapter 5 3 John chapter 5 4 John chapter 5 5 John chapter 5 6

John chapter 5 In 1 John chapter 5, the concluding chapter of the epistle, we see further developments of the central themes of the book. Love for God and each other, being born of God, obedience to the commands of God, and belief in Jesus as the Christ.

This leads to a somewhat surprising conclusion. A further sign of having been born of God is belief in Jesus as the Messiah. We might here recall John chapter 1 verses 12 to 13.

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. Once again, John connects our love for the Father with our love for our brothers and sisters. Those who love the Father love those born of him.

John has already explored the logical connection between these two forms of love at the end of the preceding chapter. This logic, however, can move in both directions, as we see in verse 2. There is a circularity to this, but it's not an illogical one. Love for our brothers and sisters will entail love for the Father, and love for the Father will entail love for our brothers and sisters.

We can easily presume that our love for others is self-evident, but here John teaches us that we need to test this love to see whether it is genuine, by examining whether we love God and obey his commandments. A supposed love for the children of God that does not proceed from love for God and keeping of his commandments is not real love at all. Here John punctures some of the common misunderstandings that one often sees in arguments about the centrality of love.

Such arguments take a supposedly self-evident human love as the measure of all things, and supposedly the only thing that really matters when it comes to Christian religion. But this is not at all what John teaches. Rather, John stresses the importance of the alignment of a number of key factors by which we can discern the genuine character of our identity as children of God.

Richard Yarborough, in his commentary, observes the simultaneity of three components of reborn Christian experience, the pistis, faith, the ethical, obedience to commandments, and the relational or agapic, love for God and others. The law was always summed up in love in a way that provided an alignment between obedience to the commandments and love, that tested both. True obedience to the commandments could only be rendered in love, and love was necessarily obedient to the commandments.

The two couldn't be divorced, which meant both that love could never become an antinomian reality, bound only to feelings and affections and existing altogether apart from the law, but nor could obedience to the law be reduced to slavish and legalistic observance. It was always to be fulfilled in love. We see this in key passages such as

Deuteronomy 6, verses 1-5.

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over to possess it, that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in the land flowing with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. In Deuteronomy chapter 11, verse 1, You shall therefore love the Lord your God, and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always. This is a point that Jesus also argued in his teaching.

In John chapter 14, verse 15, If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And in verse 21 of that chapter, Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. Against the notions held by many, the commandments of God are not burdensome.

This doesn't mean that we don't recoil at them in our sinfulness, or resist them in fear of coming into the light. However, when we actually obey the commandments of God, we discover that far from weighing us down with a heavy load, the yoke of Christ is easy, and his burden is light. His commandments set us free.

Those who have been born of God overcome the world, the complex system of lusts, seductive pleasures, and vainglorious pride that holds so many of us in its thrall. This victory, a victory manifested in our keeping of God's commandments, is achieved through our faith. The person who overcomes the world is the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

In verse 1, it was belief in Jesus as the Christ that evidenced that someone was born of God. Here it is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God that evidences this. The two terms, Christ and Son of God, are largely synonymous, although the second accents the relationship between the Son and the Father.

There are, however, people who deny this identification of Jesus as the Son of God. Some might see the man Jesus as if he were only possessed by the person of the eternal word for a period of time, who departed from him before his sufferings. This was the position of early church heretics such as Corinthus.

Against such teachers, John insists that Jesus Christ was the incarnate Son. He came by

water and blood, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood. This seems like a very strange and obscure statement to us, but it opposes those who believe that the word descended upon the man Jesus at the point of his baptism, and then left him before his sufferings of the cross.

John will not compromise with such a position. Jesus' earthly ministry did not just involve baptism, it also involved the cross. The water is Christ's baptism in the Jordan, and the blood is the baptism of his death and the cross at Calvary.

Contrary to those who argue that the baptism of Jesus was the time that he received the descending Christ, John claims that the spirit who descended at Christ's baptism in the form of a dove, testifying to him as the Son of God, is the one who testifies more generally, as Jesus taught in John 15, 26. But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. Some translations have a different reading of verse 7, the King James Version for instance, for there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one.

This might be a handy proof text for Trinitarian doctrine, if this were a genuine reading. However, the evidence weighs very strongly against it, suggesting that it was something that was likely accidentally incorporated into the text at a later point from a marginal note. It is found in none of the early Greek manuscripts, and is absent in the arguments of the early church theologians, who would have leapt at such a strong proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity.

What John does speak of is a three-fold witness of the Spirit, the water and the blood, united in their testimony. The Spirit bears witness to the truth of Christ, in his work in the body of Christ, in his work within the hearts and lives of individual Christians, in his inspiration of the testimony of Scripture. The Spirit points to Christ and testifies concerning him.

The water of Jesus' baptism continues to bear witness to the truth of Christ, as we see in the baptism of Christ a Trinitarian testimony to Jesus Christ's identity as the Beloved Son. The blood of Jesus' crucifixion bears testimony to his identity, to the pouring out of his life until death. And these three bear an enduring witness, the Spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism, descended upon the church in Pentecost, and has borne witness to Christ throughout the history of the church.

The water of Jesus' baptism is applied to us in our baptisms, baptising us into him, testifying to his identity in the historical event, in the church's performance of baptism upon new converts, and in the confession by which we receive the waters of baptism. The blood of Jesus' cross likewise bears an enduring testimony. By the blood that testified to the pouring out of his life, Jesus entered into the heavenly places, and by that blood, applied to us, has opened a new and living way for us as his people, assuring us of

access to God.

Whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, this testimony of the blood of Christ is borne to us once again. We may receive the testimony of trustworthy human beings, but the testimony of God is so much greater, and God has borne testimony to his Son by his Spirit, and in the testimony of the water and the blood. What's more, this testimony is not just an external testimony, like regular human testimony.

It is a testimony that the Spirit bears within all of those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God. Not receiving this testimony is to make God a liar, but receiving it is to receive eternal life in the Son, to whom the testimony bears witness. The choice of paths with which we are left is a stark one.

Either we have the Son, through belief in the testimony of God by his Spirit, and have life in him, or we reject the testimony of God and do not have life. John has written this epistle to people who do believe in the name of the Son of God, to the end that they might enjoy eternal life. Here we might remember John's explanation for his reasons for writing the Gospel, in John 20, verses 30-31.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. Here John seems to have a further concern. He doesn't just want his heroes to have eternal life, but he wants them to know that they have eternal life, a knowledge that might be threatened by erroneous claims about Jesus, that might unsettle them in their faith.

This knowledge is so important as it produces the confidence that fuels our prayer life. Where this firm knowledge in the identity of Christ is, the sure confidence of faith that corresponds to it can be there too, which leads, in natural progression, to an assured prayer life. John's concern here is not primarily answers to prayer, but rather the communion of prayer, the fact that we know that when we bring our concerns and needs to God, he listens to us, and he cares about us as his beloved children, and that he will, as a loving father, give us whatever we need as we bring our concerns to him.

John moves to the question here of how to deal with sin among our brothers. He describes two different types of sin, a sin not leading to death and a sin that does lead to death. There are some people who sin, but then bring themselves into the light to expose their sin and to seek forgiveness.

They do not cover it up or disguise it, they are honest about what they have done and they seek to be restored. There are others who sin in a way that is a fundamental rejection of the path of Christ. They reject the light, they live from a fundamental rebellion against God and hatred of their brothers, and in such cases no hope is held out.

Unless there is a fundamental change of direction, they will forfeit eternal life entirely. Sin of any kind is still sin, it remains deadly, even if it won't always prove fatal for the one who sins. The one who has been born of God does not sin, it is antithetical to the sort of people that the children of God are.

God protects those born of him so that they are not overpowered by Satan. Sin is alien to who we are in Christ, to what we will be finally revealed to be when our identity as the children of God is fully revealed. So we must firmly reject it and repent of it now.

If we do not, we have chosen a path that will lead to our death and final destruction. We will forfeit eternal life. If we willfully and persistently cling on to sin, if we walk in the darkness, if we hate our brothers and rebel against God, we reveal ourselves not to be of God and there is no hope for us.

But yet, if we sin and we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, to restore us, to bring us into the light and into fellowship and communion with him. Humanity is divided into two groups, those who belong to the world, the realm of sinful rebellion under the sway of the evil one, and those who belong to God as his children. Our state as those who belong to God is not something that we enjoy by natural birth or by nature.

It results from the illumination brought by Jesus Christ as the Son of God. It brings us into a knowledge of the truth. Indeed, we are brought into the one who is true, into the Father, as we are brought into his Son, Jesus Christ.

To be in the Son is to be in the Father, as the Father and the Son are one. John concludes in a way that will not leave his hearers in the slightest shadow of a doubt. Jesus Christ is not just the one who brings knowledge of the true God and of the way to eternal life.

He himself is the true God and eternal life. The identification of Jesus with eternal life was present at the beginning of the epistle, in chapter 1, verses 1-3. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. However, here at the end, John goes even further.

As in his statement about the word being God at the beginning of his gospel, he ends his first epistle by identifying Jesus Christ as no one less than the true God himself, come to us in human flesh. John's first epistle ends on a very surprising note. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

His point, however, clearly follows from all that has preceded it. True life, confidence with God in prayer, deliverance from sin, and love for God and others is found in the true knowledge of God. And this knowledge is found in believing Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of God, receiving the testimony borne by God concerning his Son in the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

Anything less than the genuine article, anything less than Jesus Christ in his true and full identity, cannot offer or provide these things. Consequently, at all costs and above all else, we must keep ourselves from idols, from any counterfeit that, falsely purporting to be the real Christ, would adulterate the testimony that God has borne, leaving us with something other than the eternal word of life himself. A question to consider.

How might John's emphasis upon idolatry at the close of his letter help us better to understand the importance of the knowledge of God in Christ more generally in our lives as Christians?