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November 12th: 2 Kings 25 & Acts 14:8-28

November 11, 2020



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The end of Judah. Persecution in Lystra.

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

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Transcript

2 Kings 25 And in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. And they built siege works all around it. So the city was besieged till the eleventh year of king Zedekiah.

On the ninth day of the fourth month, the famine was so severe in the city that there was no food for the people of the land. Then a breach was made in the city, and all the men of war fled by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, by the king's garden. And the Chaldeans were around the city, and they went in the direction of the Araba.

But the army of the Chaldeans pursued the king and overtook him in the plains of Jericho, and all his army was scattered from him. Then they captured the king and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Ribla, and they passed sentence on him. They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and

bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.

In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, that was the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every great house he burned down.

And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. And the rest of the people who were left in the city, and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard carried into exile. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen.

And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of the Lord, and the stands in the bronze sea that were in the house of the Lord, the Chaldeans broke in pieces and carried the bronze to Babylon. And they took away the pots and the shovels, and the snuffers and the dishes for incense, and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service, the firepans also, and the bowls. What was of gold the captain of the guard took away as gold, and what was of silver as silver.

As for the two pillars, the one sea, and the stands that Solomon had made for the house of the Lord, the bronze of all these vessels was beyond weight. The height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits, and on it was a capital of bronze. The height of the capital was three cubits.

A latticework and pomegranates, all of bronze, were all around the capital, and the second pillar had the same, with the latticework. And the captain of the guard took Sariah the chief priest, and Zephaniah the second priest, and the three keepers of the threshold. And from the city he took an officer who had been in command of the men of war, and five men of the king's council, who were found in the city, and the secretary of the commander of the army, who mustered the people of the land, and sixty men of the people of the land, who were found in the city.

And Nebuchadnezzar the captain of the guard took them, and brought them to the king of Babylon at Ribla. And the king of Babylon struck them down, and put them to death at Ribla in the land of Hamath. So Judah was taken into exile out of its land.

And over the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, he appointed Gedaliah the son of Ahicham, son of Shaphan governor. Now when all the captains and their men heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah governor, they came with their men to Gedaliah at Mizpah, namely Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and Johanan the son of Koriah, and Sariah the son of Tanhumath the Netophathite, and Jeazaniah the son of the Maakithite. And Gedaliah swore to them and

their men, saying, Do not be afraid because of the Chaldean officials.

Live in the land, and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you. But in the seventh month, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishamah, of the royal family, came with ten men, and struck down Gedaliah, and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans, who were with him at Mizpah. Then all the people, both small and great, and the captains of the forces, arose and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans.

And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, evil Merodach, king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. And he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments, and every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table.

And for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, as long as he lived. In 2 Kings chapter 25, the final chapter of the book of the kings, the kingdom of Judah is finally removed, and goes into exile in Babylon, joining the northern kingdom of Israel in removal from the promised land. The fate that had been foretold, from at least the reign of Hezekiah, and which was on the near horizon from the reign of Jezhiah, now befalls the nation, bringing to a tragic close a story that began with David and Solomon.

In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign, Nebuchadnezzar comes against Jerusalem, in response to Zedekiah's rebellion against him. There is a sense of inevitability to the events of this chapter, of the futility of fighting against the fate that is appointed for the nation. There is an inexorable movement from Nebuchadnezzar setting up of the siege works to the final fall of the city of Jerusalem.

Nothing can save Judah now, the disaster is in the process of unfolding, and nothing can stop it. The siege begins in January of 588 BC, and it ends in July of 586. Over the 18 months of the siege, famine conditions become severe in the city.

We should imagine a situation similar to that described of Samaria in chapter 6, where people were buying donkey's heads and doves dung to eat, and even eating their own children. The city is finally breached, at which point Zedekiah and his warriors try to flee by night, at a place where the besieging army might be the thinnest. They flee east, but are pursued by the Chaldean army, which overtakes them in the plains of Jericho.

Zedekiah's escape is short-lived, his army is scattered, he is captured. He is brought north to Riblah, where Nebuchadnezzar is now based. There his sons are killed before his eyes, and to ensure that this is the last thing that he will ever see, they put out his eyes.

He is brought in chains to Babylon, and with his sons killed, there is seemingly no hope of restoring his dynasty. Here we are told the year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in which Jerusalem fell. Now that Judah is being removed from the map, the marking of time moves from the regnal years of Judah's kings to the year of the reign of kings of Babylon.

The entire temple complex, the house of the Lord and the king's palace, is burned down, along with all of the other great and notable buildings of the city. Solomon's temple, which had been at the very heart of the life of the nation of Judah, is no more. The people had trusted in the temple, they had treated it as if it were some sort of idol, and now it is removed from them.

The walls of Jerusalem are broken down, the city is utterly humbled, any remnant of its former grandeur is reduced to smouldering rubble. The smaller remnant of the elite and the artisans that had been left after the former deportation are removed. Only some of the poorest are left to work the land.

Near the beginning of the books of the kings, we had the assembling of the furniture of the temple, and now it is stripped from the house, item by item, in a tragic mirroring of 1 Kings 7, verses 15-45, the temple is divested of its treasures. The Babylonian captain of the guard assembles a representative group of men of various high officers. They are then taken north, up to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah, where they are put to death.

Although many of the poorer people remain, Judah is now in exile, and they have ceased to exist as a nation. The remnant of the people in the land are placed under a new regime, established by the Babylonians. A man named Gedaliah is made the governor.

Mizpah is the new administrative capital after the destruction of Jerusalem. Gedaliah was a man with a strong pedigree. Both his father and his grandfather had served in top positions under Josiah.

He assures the people that if they live peaceably in the land under the rule of Babylon, no ill will befall them. However, in the seventh month of his tenure, he and his Jewish and Babylonian supporters are struck down by a minor royal with a band of assassins. Fearing imminent reprisal from the Babylonians, the people then flee to Egypt.

In Jeremiah chapter 40 and 41, we read of these events in more detail, followed by Jeremiah's failed attempt to dissuade the people from fleeing to Egypt in chapter 42, after which he is taken down to Egypt with them in chapter 43. Had the people remained, the Lord declared that he would have granted them mercy from Nebuchadnezzar, allowing them to dwell peacefully in the land. However, if they went down to Egypt, they would face destruction.

Jeremiah chapter 42 verses 7-22 describes this. At the end of ten days the word of the

Lord came to Jeremiah. Then he summoned Johanan the son of Kareah, and all the commanders of the forces who were with him, and all the people from the least to the greatest, and said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your plea for mercy before him.

If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down. I will plant you and not pluck you up, for I relented of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid.

Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy that he may have mercy on you, and let you remain in your own land. But if you say, We will not remain in this land, disobeying the voice of the Lord your God, and saying, No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there, then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, As my anger and my wrath were poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so my wrath will be poured out on you when you go to Egypt. You shall become an execration, a horror, a curse, and a taunt. You shall see this place no more.

The Lord has said to you, O remnant of Judah, Do not go to Egypt. Know for a certainty that I have warned you this day that you have gone astray at the cost of your lives. For you sent me to the Lord your God, saying, Pray for us to the Lord our God, and whatever the Lord our God says, declare to us, and we will do it.

And I have this day declared it to you. But you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord your God in anything that he sent me to tell you. Now therefore know for a certainty that you shall die by the sword, by famine and by pestilence in the place where you desire to go to live.

Whereas the account of the fall of the Northern Kingdom was followed by a lengthy discussion of the reasons why they went into exile in Assyria in chapter 17, no such explanation is found here. The reasons for Judah's exile were all given back in chapter 17. The sister kingdoms resembled each other in their sins.

The reasons why judgment falls upon Judah are the same reasons as judgment fell upon

Israel. What lessons should we draw from the books of the Kings and Chronicles? Different Old Testament books focus our attention on different levels of human existence, helping us to see both sin and righteousness as they play out. Genesis, for instance, teaches us to trace the movements of sin and grace in four generations of a single family.

1 and 2 Samuel help us to trace the movements of sin and grace in the lives of Saul and David, showing us the development of their characters over the years of their lives. Kings and Chronicles zoom out further and show us the movements of sin and grace over the history of two kingdoms, over a number of centuries. At each level we learn something more about the character of life in God's world, in addition to the way that they are tracing as their fundamental message the work of God as it goes from the very beginning, the story of creation and fall, all the way through to the time when God will deliver his people from the grave of exile and later, in the sending of his son, restore humanity in relationship with himself.

The book ends on a surprising note, with a brief flicker of hope in the gloom of exile. As Lyseray Beale notes, there is a return at this point to Judean chronology. It is the 37th year of exile, about half way through.

Jehoiachin, Zedekiah's nephew and his predecessor on the throne of Judah, is released from prison. He is treated kindly by evil Merodach and he is made to sit regularly at the king's table, above all the other captive kings in Babylon. He is also granted a regular allowance for his needs.

Judah had been told that if they submitted to Babylon, they would enjoy peace. Now, in the darkness of the grave of exile, there is a slight stirring of the bones. A question to consider.

What lessons should Israel have learned from the Lord's hand in their going down into exile and his blessing of them in it? What lessons might we learn? Acts 14, verses 8-28. Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked.

He listened to Paul speaking, and Paul looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, Stand upright on your feet. And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowd saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men.

Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with

you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.

But Zeus came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia, and when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

And they remained no little time with the disciples. Acts chapter 14 is the completion of Paul's first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas had fled from Iconium after an attempt to stone them, and they had gone on to Lystra.

At Lystra they encounter a lame man, and Paul, either with prophetic insight or with careful observation of indications that the man was giving, recognises that the man has faith to be healed. He has been listening to Paul as he speaks, and after looking intently at him, Paul calls out in a loud voice, telling him to stand upright on his feet. The man being healed, he immediately leaps up and walks.

This is a fulfilment of prophecy as we see in Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5-6. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.

It's also very similar to the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate in chapter 3. It's similar to Jesus' healing of the lame man in Luke chapter 5 verses 17-26. Craig Keener notes some of the parallels between this and Peter's healing of the lame man in chapter 3. The man in chapter 3 is a lame man from birth, and the man here is a lame man from birth. Peter gazes intently at the man in chapter 3. Paul gazes intently at the man here.

Once healed, the man in chapter 3 leaps and walks, and the same thing happens with the man here. The events of chapter 3 occur near the temple gates, and this occurs, as we see in verse 13, near the temple and the gates. The man is healed through faith in both cases, and in both cases the apostles resist the praise of the people, declaring that praise should go to God alone.

After healing the man, there is a surprising twist. The people respond by treating Paul and Barnabas as gods, Paul as Hermes, and Barnabas as Zeus. There were various myths of the gods appearing as men, and the pagans of Lystra think of Paul and Barnabas in this way.

The fact that Paul is the main speaker leads to him being identified as Hermes. Zeus, whom Barnabas is perceived to be, would have been the principal deity in their pantheon. This we should note is the first direct interaction with purely gentile pagans that we've seen in the Book of Acts, and one of the things that it gives us a window into is the message that Paul brought to such people.

Misapprehension of various kinds is a common theme in the Book of Acts. We see it in tongues being recognised as drunkenness, Simon the sorcerer and his attempt to purchase the gift of the spirit, and here idolatry is challenged as another form of misapprehension. The pagans of Lystra think that the gods have come down to earth in the likeness of men, and there is a measure of irony here, because in Christ God has come in human flesh, yet God's manifestation in the flesh is a very different sort of thing from the supposed incarnation that this would represent.

The idolatry of such pagans projected humanity onto God in a way that lessened God, whereas the Christian teaching of the incarnation never effaces or loses sight of the transcendence of God, the fact that he is the uncreated one above all earthly things, and not reducible to the realm of idolatrous worship and its images. The crowd has a purpose for Paul and Barnabas, they know who Paul and Barnabas are before they ever speak, they are Zeus and Hermes. Idolatry is always characterised by this projection onto things, by a sort of spiritual ventriloquism, whereby inanimate objects or silenced persons or realities have the voice and the beliefs of the worshipper projected into them, leading to them being misrecognised as if they were other, rather than simply a mute receptacle into which the worshipper is projecting things that will confirm them in their own way.

Paul and Barnabas respond to this blasphemy by tearing their clothes. They speak to the people of Lystra, in contrast to places elsewhere, they are not summarising Israel's history and speaking about the way that Christ fulfils it in this speech or sermon, nor are they condemning the Jews for their crucifixion of Christ. This is a message tailored for pagans for this particular situation, where they are worshipping the apostles as if they were gods.

Paul is mindful of the fact that his hearers do not share the biblical background that Jewish hearers and also God-fearers would share, and so he addresses them with a message that though rooted in biblical history, does not depend upon a prior knowledge of it. The message is one of good news, beginning with the news of creation. He is addressing them as the representative of the uncreated God who created all things, calling them to turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

The time of God's permission and the ignorance of the Gentiles has passed. The time of idolatry and spiritual blindness has passed, and worship of the Creator and the true God has come. As the hearer of Acts should recognise, the good news is one that is achieved by Christ.

It is Christ who has brought an end to this time of ignorance, by coming in human flesh. God has come down. He has not come down in a way that reduces God to the size of man, in a way that serves our idolatrous projections, but in a way that lifts man up to knowledge of and communion with his Creator.

In Acts chapter 17 he develops this message further, in verses 30 and 31 of that chapter. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Even after all of this it is only with great difficulty that the crowd is prevented from sacrificing to them.

Yet the instability and volatility of the crowd is revealed when Jews come from Antioch and Iconium. One moment they are treating Paul and Barnabas like gods, the next they are trying to stone them. The Jews coming from Antioch and Iconium seem to be tracing Paul and Barnabas' steps.

There is a sort of a shadow missionary journey here, much as there is a shadow Jew and Gentile community forming in opposition to the Gospel. Paul and Barnabas are opposing paganism, but the Jews here join with the pagans. Earlier in the book Paul had been involved in the stoning of Stephen, and now he himself is stoned.

He is stoned and left for dead. The disciples gather about him, perhaps to see if he is still alive, or maybe to pray for him. It would seem as though he was extremely seriously wounded, at the very least.

But he rises up and he enters the city. We should consider the possibility that some miraculous healing occurred here, as the next day he is well enough to go on with Barnabas to Derbe. He seems to have more success in that city, and makes many disciples, before returning to Lystra, to Iconium, and then to Antioch, retracing his steps.

On the way back he encourages the communities of disciples that were formed on his first visits. He exhorts them to continue in the faith, and he braces them for the sort of persecution that they will face in the future. He forms the believers in faithful churches, with elders appointed for each one, and with prayer and fasting commits them to the hands of the Lord.

From Antioch they go down through Pisidia, down towards Perga, where they had first landed in Asia Minor, and then from Attalia they sail back, returning to their sending church in Antioch, having completed the full mission. With them they bring news of the way that God has blessed their mission among the Gentiles. These are not just Gentile God-fearers, pagan Gentiles had been brought to the faith also.

Their sending church in Antioch will be blessed by the news of what God is achieving elsewhere in the world, knowing that they are part of a greater mission that the Spirit of God is accomplishing within the world in their day. A question to consider, where else in the New Testament do we see Paul unpacking the message that he gives to the churches here, that it is through many tribulations that they must enter the Kingdom of God?