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November 19th: Psalm 50 & Acts 18:1-23

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Alastair Roberts

Israel summoned to appear before the Judge of all the earth. Paul in Corinth.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 50, a Psalm of Asaph. The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth, from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

Our God comes, He does not keep silence. Before Him is a devouring fire, around Him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that He may judge His people.

Gather to Me My faithful ones, who made a covenant with Me by sacrifice. The heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge. Hear, O My people, and I will speak.

O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, your God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you.

Your burnt offerings are continually before Me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your flocks. For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.

I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are Mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, and call upon Me in the day of trouble.

I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me. But the wicked God says, What right have you to recite My statutes, or take My covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast My words behind you. If you see a thief, you are pleased with him, and you keep company with adulterers.

You give your mouth free reign for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. You sit and speak against your brother, you slander your own mother's son. These things you have done, and I have been silent.

You thought that I was one like yourself, but now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you. Mark this then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver. The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies Me.

To one who orders his way rightly, I will show the salvation of God. Psalm 50 is a prophetic rebuke of Israel. As Conrad Schaeffer observes, it is a sort of cosmic court scene, with the great judge coming, summoning the witnesses and the accused, before presenting an indictment of the people, on the grounds of their liturgical and moral practices, concluded with a solemn warning.

The covenant people are called to give an account of themselves, for their failure to worship, and to live faithfully. God is the judge, but He is also the prosecutor and the wronged party. After God has been introduced in three titles or names of ascending importance, the Mighty One, God, and the Lord, the whole earth is summoned before Him.

We might think the earth is being summoned to its own judgment, but that initial impression is soon wrong-footed. Asaph describes the Lord shining forth from Zion, the place where He has put His name, in a way that recalls the theophany of Sinai. There is a devouring fire before Him, and a mighty tempest all around Him.

Having sent out a horizontal summons, as it were, to the whole earth, the Lord sends out a vertical summons, calling the heavens to join the earth in witness, to the end that He might judge His people. Heaven and earth were presented as witnesses to the covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 19 to 20, so it is appropriate that they should appear here. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life

and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him. For He is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. After all of the witnesses are assembled, Israel are called to the dock, my faithful ones, the ones who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.

The heavenly assembly declare and confirm the Lord's righteousness. God Himself will be the judge. The Lord now presents His testimony against Israel.

According to the covenant promise, in charging them to attend to His words, He reminds Israel that He is their God and they are His people. They have been treating the Lord as if He was somehow in need of their sacrifices, which they could perform mindlessly, as if God merely had to be pacified with mechanistic ritual. But God doesn't need sacrifices.

He is the Creator of all and all is His. Any sacrifice is merely giving back to God what He has already given to the person making the sacrifice. Nor is God hungry.

He doesn't need food as a creature does, nor does He eat bulls and goats. What God desires from His people is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a sort of peace offering testifying to the goodness of what God had done for them. He wants them to perform their vows to Him.

He wants them to call upon Him in the day of trouble. The purpose of all of these things is so that they might know joy, communion and deliverance in relationship with Him. They have treated God with careless indifference, but God is most glorified when His people look to and take delight in Him.

Such a challenge to bear ritual, to treating religion as if it were just a matter of going through the motions, detached from hearts that look to the Lord, is something that we find in many occasions in Scripture. One important example can be seen in Isaiah 1, verses 11-17. What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.

I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me, new moon and sabbath, and the calling of convocations.

I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me.

I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. From the ritualist whose heart is far from him, the Lord turns to wicked hypocrites, to those who pay lip service to the covenant, while thoroughly rejecting and despising it in their actions.

They speak the words of the covenant ceremony and declare the Amen to its judgments, yet they then go out and pursue and approve all kinds of evil. If the first half of this psalm presented an indictment upon their sinful posture towards God and their worship, the second half focuses upon their sinful behavior towards their neighbors. Like the fools described in the book of Proverbs, they hate discipline and reproof, they reject instruction and the fear of the Lord, they disregard the second table of the commandments, they despise the discipline of parents, they approve those who steal, they keep company with adulterers, they slander their brothers.

The Lord has been long suffering with them, not judging them. The Lord's silence, however, had merely emboldened these people in their sinful presumption. The gracious delay of His judgment led them to become more assured in their wickedness.

They suffered from a severe idolatry in their imaginations, fancying that God was like them, unmindful of sin, not holy, susceptible to hollow flattery, and easily persuaded to wink at wrongdoing. However, now they must face the Lord's judgment. The psalm ends with a distinction drawn between two parties.

The wicked who forget God are charged to come to their senses and to repent while they still have time. The Lord's judgment might seem to tarry, but there will be no escape from it when it falls upon them. The righteous person, by contrast, who offers a pure sacrifice of thanksgiving and acts uprightly, will receive the deliverance of God when the time for judgment comes.

A question to consider. This psalm especially foregrounds the importance of the sacrifice of thanksgiving. In Hebrews 13, verse 15, the same language is taken up.

Through Him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name. How might this psalm help us to understand the character of true worship and how it is fulfilled in the life of the Church? Acts chapter 18, verses 1 to 23. After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them for they were tent-makers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.

And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads, I am innocent, from now on I will go to the Gentiles. And he left there and went to the worshipper of God, his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household.

And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

But when Galio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law. But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Galio said to the Jews, If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves.

I refuse to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal.

But Galio paid no attention to any of this. After this Paul stayed many days longer, and then took leave of the brothers, and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.

And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there. But he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined.

But on taking leave of them he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.

After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next, through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. After leaving Athens, Paul moves to Corinth at the beginning of Acts chapter 18. Corinth was the capital of Achaia, a Roman colony and a strategic location for the mission.

It was a large multicultural city, with strong connections to Rome. One could travel to from it in about five days. New Corinth was designed using a Roman pattern, predominantly used Latin in its public inscriptions, and a number of the people mentioned in the church there had Roman names and connections.

Estimates of its size vary quite significantly. Craig Keener suggests that if the capacity of

the theatre of the city gives an indication of the city's size, being about a tenth of the population, we would have a median estimate of about 140,000 people. Estimates of the size of the city however vary by an order of magnitude or more.

The highest and quite excessive estimate that Keener mentions is 300,000 people with about 460,000 slaves. Compared to other ancient cities, it would have been very populous, and according to some scholars, might even have been one of the top three cities of the empire. Corinth was on the Isthmus, the narrow strip of land between the Peloponnese peninsula and the mainland of Greece.

Although attempts to build a canal between the two sides had failed or been abandoned due to excessive cost, there was a path specifically designed for the transport of ships and their cargoes from one side to another. Trade and crafts had made Corinth the wealthiest city in all of Greece. As a prominent location for trade and for travellers, it should not be surprising that Corinth would have had a reputation for immorality in certain quarters also.

In Corinth, Paul finds a Jew called Aquila, a native of Pontus and a former resident of Rome. With his wife Priscilla, Aquila works as a tentmaker. Corinth was a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, and Aquila and Priscilla would naturally have fit in in this respect.

Aquila was a Jew of the Diaspora, a native of Pontus on the south coast of the Black Sea, recently expelled from Rome and Italy, and now living in Corinth in Greece. Later on they would join Paul in going to Ephesus. When Paul writes the Epistle to the Romans, they host a church in their house there.

The importance of cosmopolitans and travellers like Aquila and Priscilla was immense for the early church. Such persons were instrumental in spreading the message of the Gospel to the most strategic hubs and broadly dispersing it throughout the empire. We get a glimpse of such cosmopolitanism in places like the final chapter of the Book of Romans, where Paul mentions over 20 Christians living in a city that he had yet to visit.

Cosmopolitan tradespeople like Aquila and Priscilla would have come in contact with a huge number of people and as such would be ideal for spreading the Gospel message extensively. Such persons also formed many of the strongest connections that existed between churches in various locations at that time. Paul didn't aim to go to Rome on this particular missionary journey, but a more Roman city like Corinth would have been a perfect preparation for such a mission in the future, acculturating him to a context that was far more Roman than Syria or Judea, with which he was more familiar.

As nothing is mentioned of the conversion of Aquila and Priscilla, many commentators reasonably assume that they were already converted by this point. Paul may have started the church in Corinth, but this need not mean that he was the first Christian in the city. Although Luke's narrative in Acts closely focuses upon the Apostle Paul, we

should definitely not presume that he was the only person spreading the Gospel to new regions of the Empire during this period.

Indeed, some have suggested that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius was a response to unrest in the Jewish community after the arrival of Christians and the Gospel in the city. The historian Suetonius claimed that the Jews were expelled from the city as a result of a disturbance caused by Crestus, which many scholars have argued might be a reference to Christ. The expulsion of the Jews from Rome likely occurred in AD 49.

Some have estimated that around 50,000 Jews lived in Rome at that time. The expulsion and later return might further help to explain why Paul knew so many people in Rome before he visited. Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers, a trade which Paul shared.

Paul would often work with his own hands to support his ministry. The fact that, of all the possible tasks that he could have done, Paul was a tent maker is worthy of notice. The first disciples were fishermen, an occupation given symbolic importance in the Gospels as the Lord declared that they would be made fishers of men.

Tent making might recall the great tent of the tabernacle. Paul, Aquila and Priscilla are all part of the task of constructing a new tabernacle, the tabernacle of the church. They are like Bezalel and Aholiab in the book of Exodus.

Aquila and Priscilla are a husband-wife pair, one of a number of male and female pairs in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The way that Priscilla is spoken of alongside Aquila might reasonably be seen to suggest that she played a very prominent part in their shared ministry. Paul's missionary approach here is the same as he adopts elsewhere.

He focuses upon the synagogue and tries to persuade Jews and Greeks within it. After Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia, perhaps with further support, Paul seems to have been freed up to engage in more ministry, without the same need to devote much of his time to earning his keep. Once again, Paul is largely rejected by the Jews of the city.

His response is to shake out his garments, like shaking the dust off his feet, and to declare himself free of the guilt of their blood. This might recall the task of the watchman, as described in Ezekiel 33, verses 1-6. Paul, as the Lord's appointed messenger, is responsible to deliver his message faithfully.

However, if he delivers that message and it is rejected, the blood of the hearers lies on their own heads. Paul then declares his determination to go to the Gentiles. This wasn't a complete rejection of the Jews on Paul's part.

From Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it seems reasonable to believe that a significant

number of the earliest converts and core members of the church in the city were Jews. Furthermore, when he moved on, he would once again begin with the synagogue. This didn't represent a fundamental re-evaluation of his mission strategy then, just the focus of his mission in the city of Corinth.

There are many converts at this time. Two especially noteworthy converts are mentioned here, Titius Justus and Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue. Some have suggested that Titius Justus might be Gaius, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1-14 and Romans 16-23.

Crispus is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1-14 where we learn that Paul baptised him. The Lord, presumably Jesus, appears to Paul at night in a vision, calling him to continue teaching boldly in the city. He will be preserved by the Lord and will have success in the city, as the Lord has many people there.

It seems most likely that this is a reference, not to people already converted to the gospel, but to people either marked out for salvation or people who are faithful Jews and God-fearers who have yet to hear the message of the gospel. Usually, when cast out of the synagogue, Paul would leave the city shortly thereafter. However, on this occasion, he remains much longer.

He has a lengthy stay of 18 months in the city, presumably enabling him to teach the young church extremely extensively. Gallio, the Roman proconsul, was the son of Seneca the Older and the elder brother of the famous Stoic philosopher and statesman Seneca the Younger. He was in Corinth during the period of AD 51-52, which helps us to date Paul's visit.

The Jews focus their attack upon Paul, claiming that he is teaching people to worship contrary to the law. This continued opposition from the Jews might give the impression that, even some time after Paul has been thrown out of the synagogue, his message is making significant inroads among the Jews of the city. The claim of the Jews might be that Paul is proselytizing for a religion unrecognized by the Roman authorities.

The Jews claim might be that Paul is not teaching Judaism, a recognized religion, and for this reason is not a legitimate religious teacher in the city. However, the Christian movement is still regarded as a Jewish sect by the Roman authorities. It is important to recognize that, at this point in history, the Christian church is still generally a Jewish one, operating primarily within the social and conceptual world of Judaism.

Gallio dismisses the case, seemingly regarding the issue between the Jews and Paul as one between sects of Judaism, rather than between two different religions. Had the Jews accused Paul of some clear crime or wrongdoing, Gallio would have accepted their complaint, but he sees no reason to accept them on this matter. The identity of the All who beat Soththenes, the ruler of the synagogue, in verse 17 is unclear.

Are they the rejected delegation of the Jews? Are they Gallio's men, Gentile observers, or are they a mixture of Jews and Gentiles? It isn't entirely clear, but it's most likely that the All were a crowd of Gentile observers who beat Soththenes as the leading representative of the trouble-making Jews. Gallio's inaction might remind us of Pilate, as a character called Soththenes is mentioned in association with Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1.1. Many have speculated that this Soththenes was either already or later converted. Keener remarks upon how many details of Paul's visit to Corinth are either confirmed or possibly strengthened by other references in the New Testament, including but not limited to the fact that Aquila and Priscilla were a married missionary team.

They made their homes available for Christian work and were known to the Corinthians. They had connections with Rome and Ephesus. Paul supported himself while in Corinth.

Crispus was converted and baptised. Timothy and Silas were both involved in the Corinthian work. Paul began his work there before Silas and Timothy arrived.

He passed through Athens en route there. Soththenes was possibly a convert associated with Corinth. The Corinthian church had a significant Jewish element and Paul later spent a period of time in Ephesus.

After staying for a lengthy further period, Paul returns to Syria and his sending church of Antioch, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Sancreia he cut his hair as part of a vow. Whether a Nazarite vow or a private vow, this was likely a Jewish practice and would have been completed by a sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem, which he may have visited before returning to Antioch.

Paul spends a brief period in the city of Ephesus, reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue and leaving Priscilla and Aquila in the city, declaring his intention to return if the Lord permitted at a later point. Ephesus was another sizeable city, likely even larger than Corinth, with a stronger claim to have been the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. Paul returned to Antioch by way of Caesarea.

After spending some time in Antioch, he began his third missionary journey in verse 23, going throughout Phrygia and Galatia, mostly consolidating work that had already been established, rather than starting anything new. A question to consider, how did Paul explain his reasons for his practice of supporting himself with his own hands to the Corinthian Christians in his correspondence to them?