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Surrounded by packs of dogs, the psalmist waits upon the Lord. A riot in Ephesus.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 59, to the Choir Master, according to Do Not Destroy, a miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him. Deliver me from my enemies, O my God, protect me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from bloodthirsty men.

For behold, they lie in wait for my life. Fierce men stir up strife against me. For no transgression or sin of mine, O Lord, for no fault of mine, they run and make ready.

Awake, come to meet me and see. You, Lord God of hosts, O God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations, spare none of those who treacherously plot evil. Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city.

There they are, bellowing with their mouths, with swords in their lips. For who, they think, will hear us? But you, O Lord, laugh at them. You hold all the nations in derision.

O my strength, I will watch for you. For you, O God, are my fortress. My God in his steadfast love will meet me.

God will let me look in triumph on my enemies. Kill them not, lest my people forget. Make them totter by your power and bring them down, O Lord our shield.

For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips, let them be trapped in their pride. For the cursing and lies that they utter, consume them in wrath. Consume them till they are no more, that they may know that God rules over Jacob to the ends of the earth.

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. They wander about for food and growl if they do not get their fill. But I will sing of your strength.

I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress. O my strength, I will sing praises to you.

For you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love. Psalm 59 is the cry of an individual in distress for help. The superscription associates it with the events of 1 Samuel 19 verses 11-18.

Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch him, that he might kill him in the morning. But Michael, David's wife, told him, If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed. So Michael let David down through the window, and he fled away and escaped.

Michael took an image and laid it on the bed, and put a pillow of goat's hair at its head, and covered it with the clothes. And when Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, He is sick. Then Saul sent the messengers to see David, saying, Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him.

And when the messengers came in, behold, the image was in the bed, with the pillow of goat's hair at its head. Saul said to Michael, Why have you deceived me thus, and let my enemy go, so that he has escaped? And Michael answered Saul, He said to me, Let me go, why should I kill you? Now David fled and escaped, and he came to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. And he and Samuel went to live at Naath.

When reading such superscriptions we should bear in mind that they are not part of the Psalms themselves, but most likely later editions. The majority of the Psalms have superscriptions of some kind, only thirty-four have none. The superscriptions generally give us a number of pieces of information.

First of all, the collection to which they belong, the author who wrote them. Some contain information for their performance. Others have details about the genre to which

they belong, a miktam or a maskil or something like that.

And then a few others have historical superscriptions, presenting specific historical events as the background for the psalm. The Septuagint halves the number of the Psalms without superscripts. In Habakkuk chapter 3 verses 2-19 we find an example of a sort of psalm outside of the Book of Psalms.

That composition has both a superscription and a postscript, addressing it to the choirmaster with stringed instruments. Psalm 72 has both a superscription and a postscript, the postscript closing out the second book of the Psalter. There is a debate over whether some of the material within the superscriptions of various psalms actually belongs as postscript for the preceding psalm, even though they have come down to us as superscriptions.

Historical superscriptions, such as we have here, are clustered in the second book of the Psalter and overwhelmingly relate psalms to events in David's life prior to his becoming king. Of the thirteen instances, eight are found in Psalms 51-63. There are reasonable grounds to question whether the superscriptions are inspired.

They might be better considered as lying in a sort of penumbral realm. We shouldn't put over much weight upon them and their accuracy, but nor should we dismiss them. Even if they were completely uninspired, we should not presume thereby that they convey no true information, even less that they are theologically misleading or inaccurate, nor that their content is useless to the interpreter of the psalms.

Part of what they involve is a tentative correspondence between Psalms of David and the story of David, between the books of Samuel and the Psalter, strengthening the bond between the Psalter and the rest of the canon. They underline the interrelatedness of the canon. The superscriptions more generally help us to discern greater order and structure within the Psalter.

They illumine the sort of considerations that guided the arrangers of the Psalter, as Gordon Wenham has argued, among others. They overwhelmingly present David in weakness, suffering and crisis, mostly during his pursuit by Saul, but also after Nathan's confrontation with him after his sin concerning Bathsheba in Psalm 51 and during the coup of Absalom. These historical settings contrast with the portrait of the glorious exalted king found in royal psalms such as Psalm 110.

They offer exemplary instances in which such a psalm could be sung. The David of the historical superscriptions is a David in distress. He serves as the paradigmatic worshipper, inviting the worshipper to identify with the king in their own distress.

Whether or not these are historically accurate in a strictly literal manner, they are very instructive indications of how the Psalms were supposed to be read in a more theological

manner. It is entirely possible that the compilers of the Psalms were reading the inspired words of the Psalms back into the story of the suffering David. In a not dissimilar manner to the way that Christians read them forward into the story of the suffering son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, in the historical superscriptions then we might find an invitation and precedent for engaging in messianic reading of the Psalms.

This psalm opens with a series of petitions, two requests for deliverance from evil enemies, paralleled with petitions to be set on high in protection from those who are rising up against him and to be saved. The psalmist describes his adversaries, apart from any wrong that he has committed, they are stirring up conflict and setting traps for him. In these verses a fuller picture of the enemies introduced at the beginning of verse 1 of the psalm is gradually emerging.

He calls upon the Lord to act, addressing him as the God of Israel and of the nations, as the God who has committed himself to act on behalf of his people. The psalmist petitions God to arouse himself and to execute his judgments upon the nations and their evildoers. Verse 6 is a sort of refrain to which we will return in verse 14.

It characterises the psalmist's enemies. They are like packs of menacing dogs who prowl and howl. Their destructive power is in their speech and they do not think that anyone will be able to act against them.

This portrayal of them is powerful and unflattering. The enemies of the psalmist are like bands of unclean scavengers. The packs of dogs may growl, but the Lord scoffs at them.

The unruly pack of the nations is an object of ridicule for him. They are unable to threaten his power or ultimately to destroy those who take refuge in him. The hearer of the psalm might be reminded of Psalm 2 verse 4, he who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord holds them in derision.

In verses 9-10 the psalmist watches for God. God is his strength, he trusts in him as a fortress. He is confident that God will act in his defence and deliverance, bringing him triumph over his enemies.

In looking to God he rests in God's character and power. God is mighty and a secure refuge to those who look to him for shelter. He is a God of steadfast love who will not abandon his servants.

He will return to these themes at the end of the psalm. The psalmist seeks God's judgement against those who have risen up against him. He desires that they would be made an example of.

He doesn't want them to be killed outright. Rather he prays that they would be made to totter and to stagger, being destroyed more gradually over a period of time, rendering them a more powerful and cautionary example in the minds of the people of Israel and in

the eyes of the nations. When they face this destruction they will be suffering for the sins of their mouths.

This is one of several instances of an imprecatory psalm. A psalm calling God to destroy stubbornly recalcitrant enemies of his rule and his people. In such psalms the psalmist puts his vindication in the hands of the Lord and petitions him to act in terms of his covenant.

The enemies are marked by persistent evil and sinfulness and persecution and oppression and calling for God to bring destruction upon them is a petition for God's judgement to be enacted, vindicating and delivering the righteous while bringing down the wicked. Various writers have written helpfully on the imprecatory psalms which often cause Christians some discomfort. However, used carefully and appropriately they have a place in the life, the prayers and the worship of the church.

John Day's *Crying for Justice* is an example of a useful book on the subject and more recently Trevor Lawrence has been doing research on the issue. The conclusion of the psalm returns to the description of the enemies as prowling dogs, repeating verse 6. This time however they are described as growling and wandering about for food if they aren't satisfied. The dogs come in the evening but in the morning the psalmist sings of God's steadfast love which has preserved him through the night.

The contrast between the night and the day becomes a metaphor for the contrast between the distress of the psalmist when he is stalked by his enemies and he must wait for deliverance and the relief of the morning, when the prowling dogs slink back to their dens. The action of God is the answer to the threatenings of the wicked. The description of the dogs in verses 6-7 was answered by the psalmist's confidence in a waiting God as he looked to him for deliverance in verses 8-10.

The same pattern recurs at the end of the psalm. The dogs come out again in verses 14-15 and in verses 16-17 the psalmist looks to God's deliverance. However now he looks to it not as something awaited in the future but as something that has been realised.

Verses 9-10 read, O my strength I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress. My God in his steadfast love will meet me. God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.

Verse 17 by contrast reads, O my strength I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love. The latter is the statement of one whose watching for God has been rewarded by sight, whose waiting for him has been met with deliverance. A question to consider, what are some examples of New Testament passages that figure the story of Christ into the Psalms? Acts 19, verses 21-41 Now after these events Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia, Lycaea, and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.

And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the way, for a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together with the workmen in similar trades, and said, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.

And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship. When they heard this they were enraged, and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

So the city was filled with a confusion, and they rushed together into the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go among the crowd, the disciples would not let him, and even some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward, and Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defence to the crowd. But when they recognised that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple-keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky, seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash.

For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another.

But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion. And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

At the end of Acts chapter 19 Paul is still in Ephesus, where he has been for a few years now. The hero might even be wondering if he will settle in Ephesus for the long term, expanding his influential school there. However Paul's eyes now turn to the next stage of

his mission.

He is primarily a travelling missionary, not a settled teacher. His plan is to pass back through Macedonia and Achaia, and then go back to Jerusalem. The purpose of this itinerary seems to be in part one of gathering a collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

He has already delivered aid to Jerusalem back at the end of chapter 11. It was at this juncture that Paul seems to have written 1 Corinthians. He describes his travel plans in more detail in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 1-12.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing.

I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.

So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now.

He will come when he has opportunity. This time seems to have been an important epistle-writing period for Paul, during the conclusion of his time in Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians. After leaving Ephesus and passing through Macedonia, he would write 2 Corinthians.

At some point on the return leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he would write Romans. Romans chapter 15 verses 23-28 gives further indication both of the time of its writing, of Paul's further travel plans at the time, and also of the purpose of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while.

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints

at Jerusalem, for they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

The collection for the saints in Jerusalem was a concrete expression of the unity of the Church, of the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles. There might have been few if any Gentiles in the Church in Jerusalem, but such a gift was a way of expressing the bond that existed between the different parts of the Church of Christ. This was one of the reasons why Paul's missionary journeys, his epistle writing, and his gift collecting were so essential.

They knit together churches scattered throughout the empire, establishing a unified and communicating network, where otherwise there might have been isolated and divergent groups. It is interesting, however, that in the book of Acts we do not have the same emphasis upon the collection for the saints in Jerusalem as we do in the Pauline epistles. This might be surprising.

One can imagine that an emphasis upon the collection for the saints in Jerusalem would bring the story full circle. It would be a way of expressing the way that the Gentiles were being included in the pattern of giving to each other and supporting each other that was so emphasised in the pattern of life of the Jerusalem Church. It would also underline the unity of Jew and Gentile in a single body supporting each other, confirming the message of the Jerusalem Council.

The fact that this theme is present but very clearly put to the background might be an indication that the themes that Luke foregrounds are of extreme importance in his mind. Only a theme of such prominence and significance might explain why these themes are not so emphasised. Paul sends Timothy and Erastus ahead to prepare the way for him.

This is particularly important because they need to prepare the gift of the churches to give the churches time to gather something together. Paul's expression of his need to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome might remind us of the geographical destiny that was marked out for the church's mission at the beginning of the Book of Acts. Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

It might also remind us of Christ's purposeful movement towards Jerusalem in the Gospel. Like his master, Paul has a destiny to fulfil and that destiny involves travel to two key destinations. Paul's success and the success of the Way, the name for the early Christian movement at the time, leads to disturbance in Ephesus.

The Jews had opposed him earlier when he had been teaching in the synagogue but now persecution is instigated by pagan idolaters. Paul is largely absent from this particular episode which focuses upon Demetrius and the mob that he forms, literally the Ecclesia,

a chaotic parody of the true assembly of the people of God. We might, as Darrell Bark notes, have an allusion to this event in 2 Corinthians 1 8-10.

On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. Bark along with other commentators observes that Luke seems to have particularly robust sources for the events in this section with a seemingly strong local knowledge. The unrest that we read of at the end of this chapter is similar to other events that we read of in first century settings.

It is entirely believable in its context. The disturbance is provoked by the concerns of Demetrius and other Ephesian craftsmen that the success of Paul's labours are threatening the success of their trades which depend heavily upon the demand from a now decreasing pool of idolaters. A host of commercial enterprises rested upon the cult of Artemis or Diana as she was known in Roman religion.

Her temple in Ephesus was tremendously large. According to some estimates it was four times the size of the Parthenon and much larger than a football pitch. Her cult was hugely influential and the commerce surrounding it correspondingly immense.

Support for the cult of Artemis in Ephesus seems to have arisen in part from the falling of a meteorite in the region as the town clerk notes in verse 35. incredible amount of silver in the verses preceding. Demetrius gathers together the craftsmen and the workmen and rouses them to action by alerting them to the fact that their trade is going to suffer if Paul's mission succeeds.

The more that Paul gains followers, the more that demand for their services, for their products will diminish. So much of the commerce of the city depends upon the cult of Artemis and the civic pride of the place also. He is concerned that not only will there be less demand for their products, they may even start to come into general disrepute, people starting to look upon the worship of idols and the trade that surrounds them as something to be rejected as false and depraved religion.

Given the success that Paul had been having in the region, this was not an entirely unreasonable fear. The response of the craftsmen and the workmen is anger and the commotion that they cause spreads throughout the city so that all sorts of people are joining in in a movement that they do not entirely understand. They rush to the theatre and take with them Gaius and Aristarchus who have been Paul's companions from Macedonia.

One of the things that is revealed here is the mercenary character of both pagan and Jewish worship. So much that presents itself as piety is really about business concerns, about the service of mammon. What's also happening here is an anticipation of the riot that will occur in Jerusalem when Paul is taken in the temple, presumably because he has defiled it when he has done no such thing.

The disciples surrounding Paul do not allow him to go into the assembly in the theatre. While people would not be able to prevent him going to Jerusalem where they knew that he faced imprisonment, here they do have success. Paul has friends also among the Asiarchs, rulers of the city who also persuade him not to go into the theatre.

Recognising the parallels between this account and the story a few chapters later of Paul being taken in the temple, we might see some sort of parallel being drawn between the temple and the theatre. In the confusion and the commotion, many in the crowd do not know why they have been assembled. Some of the crowd put forward a Jew named Alexander who wants to make a defence to the assembly.

It is not impossible that this Alexander was the same Alexander the coppersmith that Paul refers to in 2 Timothy 4.14, a man who according to that text caused him much harm. However, as Alexander is recognised to be a Jew, he is considered by the general crowd to be aligned with Paul. Like Paul, he is a Jew who opposes the idolatry of the city.

Their response is to cry out in support of Artemis for almost two hours. Finally, the town clerk is able to bring some quiet to the situation. He settles the crowd and delivers a speech.

As he points out, neither Paul nor his companions had committed sacrilege, they did not blaspheme Artemis. Paul and his disciples did not have an iconoclastic approach to pagan artefacts. They were respectful and they kept the peace.

Paul had friends among the authorities of the city, among the Asiarchs. Throughout the epistles of the New Testament, the posture of Christians in society is described as one of keeping peace, of not causing nuisance, of not being busybodies, of being at peace with people around and seeking to be held in high repute by all. The anger of Demetrius and the other craftsmen are without grounds.

If they had any reasonable grounds for complaints against Paul, the courts are open, they can go to them. However, they are the ones causing a disturbance, they are the ones that are really the threat to the city. The city of Ephesus enjoys a free city status and if it has commotion and riots like this, it may find that status severely curtailed.

Demetrius and his companions are the ones that are really putting the city at risk. A question to consider. Reading this account, how can it help us to understand the way in which the church did and did not turn the world upside down?