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Hezekiah reestablishes true worship in the Temple. The conversion of Saul.

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

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Transcript

2 Chronicles 29. Hezekiah began to reign when he was 25 years old, and he reigned 29 years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abijah the daughter of Zechariah, and he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done.

In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the Lord and repaired them. He brought in the priests and the Levites and assembled them in the square on the east and said to them, Hear me, Levites, now consecrate yourselves, and consecrate the house of the Lord, the God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the holy place. For our fathers have been unfaithful and have done what was evil in the sight of the Lord our God.

They have forsaken him and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord and turned their backs. They also shut the doors of the vestibule and put out the lamps and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the holy place to the

God of Israel. Therefore the wrath of the Lord came on Judah and Jerusalem, and he has made them an object of horror, of astonishment, and of hissing, as you see with your own eyes.

For behold, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the Lord, the God of Israel, in order that his fierce anger may turn away from us. My sons, do not now be negligent, for the Lord has chosen you to stand in his presence, to minister to him, and to be his ministers and make offerings to him.

Then the Levites arose, Mahath the son of Amasai, and Joel the son of Azariah of the sons of the Kohathites, and of the sons of Morari, Kisht the son of Abdi, and Azariah the son of Jehalelel, and of the Gershonites, Joah the son of Zimah, and Eden the son of Joah, and of the sons of Elizaphan, Shemri, and Jewel, and of the sons of Asaph, Zechariah, and Mataniah, and of the sons of Heman, Jehuel, and Shimei, and of the sons of Jejudan, Shemiah, and Uziel. They gathered their brothers and consecrated themselves, and went in as the king had commanded, by the words of the Lord, to cleanse the house of the Lord. The priests went into the inner part of the house of the Lord to cleanse it, and they brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the temple of the Lord, into the court of the house of the Lord.

And the Levites took it, and carried it out to the brook Kidron. They began to consecrate on the first day of the first month, and on the eighth day of the month they came to the vestibule of the Lord. Then for eight days they consecrated the house of the Lord, and on the sixteenth day of the first month they finished.

Then they went in to Hezekiah the king, and said, We have cleansed all the house of the Lord, the altar of burnt offering and all its utensils, and the table for the showbread and all its utensils. All the utensils that king Ahaz discarded in his reign when he was faithless, we have made ready and consecrated, and behold they are before the altar of the Lord. Then Hezekiah the king rose early, and gathered the officials of the city, and went up to the house of the Lord, and they brought seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs, and seven male goats for a sin offering for the kingdom, and for the sanctuary, and for Judah.

And he commanded the priests, the sons of Aaron, to offer them on the altar of the Lord. So they slaughtered the bulls, and the priests received the blood, and threw it against the altar. And they slaughtered the rams, and their blood was thrown against the altar.

And they slaughtered the lambs, and their blood was thrown against the altar. Then the goats for the sin offering were brought to the king and the assembly, and they laid their hands on them, and the priests slaughtered them, and made a sin offering with their blood on the altar, to make atonement for all Israel. For the king commanded that the burnt offering and the sin offering should be made for all Israel.

And he stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet. For the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets. The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets.

Then Hezekiah commanded that the burnt offerings be offered on the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord began also, and the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David king of Israel. The whole assembly worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded.

All this continued until the burnt offering was finished. When the offering was finished, the king and all who were present with him bowed themselves and worshipped. And Hezekiah the king and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer.

And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshipped. Then Hezekiah said, You have now consecrated yourselves to the Lord. Come near, bring sacrifices and thank-offerings to the house of the Lord.

And the assembly brought sacrifices and thank-offerings, and all who were of a willing heart brought burnt offerings. The number of the burnt offerings that the assembly brought was seventy bulls, one hundred rams, and two hundred lambs. All these were for a burnt offering to the Lord.

And the consecrated offerings were six hundred bulls and three thousand sheep. But the priests were too few, and could not flay all the burnt offerings. So until other priests had consecrated themselves, their brothers the Levites helped them, until the work was finished.

For the Levites were more upright in heart than the priests in consecrating themselves. Besides the great number of burnt offerings, there was the fat of the peace offerings, and there were the drink offerings for the burnt offering. Thus the service of the house of the Lord was restored.

And Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced, because God had provided for the people, for the thing came about suddenly. Three scriptural books record the reign of Hezekiah. Isaiah chapters 36-39, 2 Kings chapters 18-20, and the account of 2 Chronicles that begins here in chapter 29 and continues until the end of chapter 32.

In each of these books Hezekiah plays an important role. After the wickedness of Ahaz, one of the most evil kings, especially of the southern kingdom, there is another good king on the throne of Judah. During his reign the northern kingdom of Israel will fall to the Assyrians, but the southern kingdom will undergo a dramatic spiritual reformation.

Hezekiah is highly commended. He is described as doing what is right in the eyes of the

Lord, according to all that David his father had done. Second Chronicles, uniquely among the three biblical sources that we have for Hezekiah's life, discusses his restoration of the temple of the Lord.

Ahaz had compromised the temple and its worship, reordering it after the pattern of pagan worship. He had built a new altar according to the plan of an altar in Damascus. He had sold off many of the treasures, removed most of the utensils, and redesigned things such as the bronze sea.

Ahaz had even closed off the doors of the temple in 2 Chronicles 28-24. And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of the Lord, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God. And he shut up the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem.

Hezekiah, in the very first year of his reign, in the first month, opens the doors of the house of the Lord, and repairs them. From the very outset he sets out to repair and utterly to reverse what his father has done. One of the primary tasks of the king was to establish true worship, and this is of great concern to Hezekiah, who is going to restore the proper worship of the temple of God, he's going to cut off idolatry, he's going to reform the Levitical priesthood, and he's going to re-establish the nation in covenant with the Lord.

He charges the priests to recognize the sins of their predecessors, and to set things right. Throughout the history of Judah, the kings and the priests have been failing. They have fallen short.

Every single king has something against him. Every single king has in some respect brought God's judgement down upon the nation, and the priests have failed also. The appalling state of the temple of the Lord is a testimony to their failure to perform their duties.

As a consequence of the sins of the priests, and the people, and the kings, the many judgements that Judah has experienced has come upon them. Hezekiah reminds the Levites of their duties, and they are listed according to their clans. He's going to re-establish order in the priesthood.

The whole building needs to be cleaned out, both physically and spiritually. Hezekiah intends to make a covenant with the Lord, re-dedicating the nation to him. Before this can occur, the Levites must remove everything impure from the temple, and replace it with consecrated objects and consecrated persons.

The building represents the people of the Lord. One could perhaps regard it as a sort of picture of Dorian Gray at the heart of the nation in Jerusalem. In the temple the spiritual and moral wickedness of the people has been made apparent, and the fact that the

temple is filled with filth and impurity and pollution that needs to be cleared out is a concrete indication of how far the nation has fallen.

It takes eight days to go through the building and clear out all the impurity, and to consecrate it again takes eight further days. The Levites having done all of this then provide a full report to Hezekiah of their work. In addition to the temple of the Lord, the people need to be re-consecrated to the Lord.

Hezekiah instructs them to perform a comprehensive sin offering. Seven bulls, seven rams, seven lambs, and seven male goats. These animals stand for the kingdom, for the sanctuary, and for Judah.

Every single part of the nation needs to be atoned for. They were all sinful and without health, and now they need to be restored. The sin offering of the goats represents the rulers, as we see in Leviticus chapter 4 verses 22-24.

When a leader sins, doing unintentionally any one of all the things that by the commandments of the Lord his God ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring as his offering a goat, a male without blemish, and shall lay his hand on the head of the goat, and kill it in the place where they killed the burnt offering before the Lord. It is a sin offering. Before anything else can be done, the sins of the nation and their pollution of the house of the Lord have to be dealt with completely.

While all of this is taking place, Levites are standing with musical instruments, with trumpets, as part of the ceremony. David introduced music into the worship of the Lord to a far greater degree than formerly. The music and the symbolic animal sacrifices go together, and they integrate the two into a more humanized sort of sacrifice.

Within the New Testament, when animal sacrifices pass away, it will be the sacrifice of praise and other such things that come to the foreground. Here we already see this movement starting to take place. After the sin offerings, burnt offerings followed, the people symbolically offering themselves up to the Lord, and this is accompanied, fittingly, by music and by song.

Once the people have been cleansed by the sin offerings, and rededicated to the Lord by the burnt offerings, the worship of the temple can begin again. The building has been cleansed, the people have been cleansed, and the people and the building have both been rededicated. As the very initial act in his reign then, Hezekiah reestablishes the true service of the Lord.

In this respect, he is performing his task as a king admirably. Once the worship of the Lord has been reestablished, the assembly offers sacrifices in great number – 70 bulls, 100 rams, 200 lambs, and then 600 bulls and 3,000 sheep for the consecrated offerings.

And as there simply aren't enough priests to deal with this quantity of offerings, the Levites have to help them.

This reestablishing of the true worship of the Lord and the rededication of the people to him is a cause of great rejoicing for Hezekiah and the people. Hezekiah has begun his reign in the very strongest of possible ways. A question to consider, how might Hezekiah's cleansing and reconsecrating of the temple and the people and their dedication to the Lord anew offer a pattern for our rededication of our lives to the Lord after failures in the past? Acts 9, verses 1-31 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him, and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, Who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.

So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias.

The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.

But Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem, and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name. But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. So Ananias departed and entered the house, and laying his hands on him, he said, Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus, and immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogue, saying, He is the Son of God.

And all who heard him were amazed, and said, Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests? But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him.

But his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists, but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus.

So the church throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9 of the book of Acts is a critical turning point in the narrative.

Much of the rest of the book will be concerned with the journeys of the apostle Paul. While we were introduced to Saul at the martyrdom of Stephen back in chapter 7, here we read about his conversion. This story follows on from the story of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Like that story, it's concerned with the conversion of a particular individual. The Ethiopian eunuch might have represented the ends of the earth. But Saul represents an extreme of another kind.

Saul is the leading persecutor of the church, as we see at the beginning of this chapter. He's breathing out threats and murder, just as he was willingly involved in the stoning of Stephen. Here he is trying to pursue the Christians that have been scattered after Stephen, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

The very fact that he is undertaking this mission might give an indication of the counterproductive effects of the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem. The early Christians had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution, bringing the message wherever they went, and now they are trying to bring them back, because the message is spreading everywhere. Like the story of the road to Emmaus, or the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the story of the conversion of Saul takes place on a journey.

There's an encounter with the risen Christ. There is an opening of the understanding. Later on, there's an opening of the eyes, and the story is completed by receiving baptism.

The story of the conversion of Saul is told on three different occasions within the book of Acts. It is that important. There are slight differences between each of the accounts, which means that we need to harmonise them in some way or other.

But as they are told for different ends, it's not surprising that different aspects of the story will be highlighted in different places. The early Christian movement represents a significant threat in Saul's mind, considering the rapid rise of the church in Jerusalem, and then its spread to many different parts following, not least the region of Samaria. It's not surprising that he was concerned.

Here we meet him searching out Christians in Damascus, 135 miles north of Jerusalem. Considering the fact that this movement had risen from nothing, and had grown to such huge proportions in such a brief span of time, Saul recognises that this is not just a regular breakaway sect. This represents something far more serious, and he is driven by a sort of zeal, a zeal that probably takes the model of Phinehas, or the Levites that rallied to the side of Moses in Exodus chapter 32, or maybe the example of the prophet Elijah.

All of these great figures of zeal probably lie behind Saul's self-conception as he fights off this new movement. At this point, the Christian movement is described as the Way. In John chapter 14, Jesus spoke of himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are various examples of two-way teachings. There's a way of wisdom, there's a way of folly, there's a way of righteousness, and there's a way of wickedness. Speaking of Christianity as a Way suggests that it is less a matter of teachings than a matter of life and practice.

It's a matter of how you live in a particular mode of discipleship, following a master, Jesus the Messiah. While doctrine was clearly not unimportant, it may not have been as prominent in the understanding of many early Christians as it is in the minds of Christians today. A good early example of teaching Christianity as the Way can be found in the Didache, a very early Christian document dating from the first century AD.

That document begins as follows. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this.

First, you shall love God who made you. Second, your neighbour as yourself, and all things whatsoever you would should not occur to you, do not also do to another. The text then goes on to elaborate upon these, the first and the second great commandment that sum up the law and the golden rule, at quite considerable length.

As Saul is approaching Damascus, a light comes from heaven and shines all around him, and he falls to the ground, hearing a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? This sort of divine address is very similar to ones that we find in the Old Testament, as the Lord speaks to Abraham, or as the Lord speaks to Moses at the burning bush. Saul responds by asking who is speaking to him, and receives the answer that it is Jesus, whom he is persecuting. Within this response is contained a great mystery of the Christian faith, which will become later a subject of considerable theological reflection for Paul himself.

The people of God are united to Christ, and Christ is united to his body. What is done to his body is done to Christ, and the blessings of Christ are enjoyed by his body. Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him.

Here we might consider the many similarities between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul. Both are Benjaminites, both persecute the Davidic King. When King Saul persecutes David, David responds in 1 Samuel 26, verse 18, and he said, Why does my Lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Christ's question as the Davidic Messiah to Saul of Tarsus is a very similar one.

We will see further exploration of the relationship between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul in a few chapters time. Jesus instructs Saul to go into the city, and to wait there until he will be told what to do. The men who are with him recognise that something has gone on.

They experience some aspect of the phenomena, but they do not truly understand what has taken place. They seem to hear the sound of the voice, but they do not understand what was said. When Saul gets up from the ground, he is blind.

Like Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist at the beginning of the book of Luke, his loss of a faculty is an indication of something of his spiritual state. Zachariah failed adequately to hear the word of the Lord, and Saul cannot see the truth of Jesus Christ. Saul spends three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking.

Perhaps we are supposed to see this as a sort of death of the old Saul, and then he is going to be raised from this state in a few days time. The Lord then appears to a man named Ananias, a second Ananias. The first Ananias was the negative example of Ananias, the husband of Sapphira, and here we have a positive Ananias, one who is a faithful disciple, who will be the means by which the church receives Saul for the first time.

Ananias is instructed in a vision to come and to see this man Saul of Tarsus who is praying. Understandably, Ananias having heard about Saul is apprehensive about coming to meet him, but yet the Lord reassures him. Saul is a chosen vessel of the Lord's to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

This is a summary of the later mission of Saul that will occupy the book of Acts. In particular, this man who has inflicted much suffering upon the church needs to learn how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name. This might be seen as a negative thing, a sort of punishment of Saul, but quite the opposite.

It is a form of honour that he might share in the sufferings of Christ. Once again, this will be an important theme within the writings of Paul himself. He sees within his very own call something that indicates the importance and the value that the Lord places upon the sufferings that he experiences.

His apostleship finds its honour in suffering for and in Christ, not in some supposed victorious Christian life free from all suffering and difficulty and hardship. Ananias visiting Saul places his hands upon him, informs him that he has been sent by Jesus Christ and that he will receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fall from his eyes, his sight is restored, he rises and he is baptised.

There is a sort of paradigmatic conversion pattern here. A man who sees the light of Christ is convicted by it, his eyes are opened and he is enlightened, and he rises up, not just physically but spiritually, and is baptised. The change in Saul's character could not be more remarkable.

He spends some time with the disciples at Damascus and immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogues, declaring that he is the Son of God. Those hearing him are astonished, they know that he was sent from Jerusalem to try and bring Christians back there in chains. And yet, here he is, proclaiming the name of the One whose followers he once tried to destroy.

Perhaps we could see some similarities between this account and the story of Christ's baptism and the events after it in Luke chapter 3 and 4. In that account the heavens are opened, there is a voice from heaven, there is a baptism and a time of fasting. That's followed by going to the synagogue and preaching in the synagogue, where people are astonished, thinking that they had the measure of the person who is speaking, when clearly they had not. As there is an attempt to kill Saul in this chapter, there is an attempt to kill Jesus back in Luke chapter 4, and in both cases the protagonist escapes.

Part of what is happening here, which Luke wants us to see, is that Paul is being conformed to Christ, he is becoming like his saviour. The Benjamite Saul, who was like his Old Testament namesake earlier in the chapter, has now become more like David. As David was let down through a window by Michael, so Saul is let down over the wall by the people in Damascus.

Saul's escape here is also described by him in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 32-33. In Galatians chapter 1 verse 17 he also describes going to Arabia before returning to Damascus. After leaving Damascus he goes to Jerusalem, and while he attempts to join

the disciples he finds that they don't trust him, because they know of his history of persecution.

It is only when Barnabas steps in and vouches for him that he is able to join. Barnabas, to whom we were introduced back in chapter 4, introduces him to the apostles and tells them his story. And while the story of Saul began with the martyrdom of Stephen, at the end of this section there may be no one whom Saul more reminds us of than Stephen himself.

Like Stephen he preaches boldly, he disputes with the Hellenists and people are seeking to kill him. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Saul's vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus might have informed the later theology of the apostle Paul?